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**THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH**

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THE LAW OF THE GUN  
THE TRIUMPH OF JOHN KARS  
THE PURCHASE PRICE  
THE MEN WHO WROUGHT  
THE SON OF HIS FATHER  
THE LAW-BREAKERS  
THE WAY OF THE STRONG  
THE GOLDEN WOMAN  
THE TWINS OF SUFFERING CREEK  
THE ONE WAY TRAIL  
THE TRAIL OF THE AXE  
THE SHERIFF OF DYKE HOLE  
THE COMPACT  
THE WATCHERS OF THE PLAINS  
THE NIGHT-RIDERS  
THE BROODING WILD  
THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH  
THE DEVIL'S KEG

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# THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

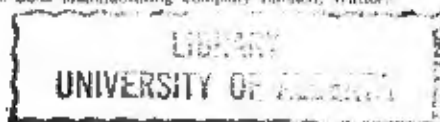
BY  
RIDGWELL CULLUM

AUTHOR OF  
THE BOOKS ON THE OPPOSITE PAGE

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# THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

## CHAPTER I

### IN THE MOUNTAINS

A FAILED LED, low, gleaming just over a rampart of mountain-tops. Sundogs—heralds of stormy weather—fiercely staring, like sentries, upon either hand of the mighty sphere of light. Vast glaciers shimmering jewel-like in the steely light of the semi-Arctic evening. Black belts of gloomy pinewoods on the lower slopes of the mountains, the trees snow-burdened, but black with the darkness of the night in their melancholy depths. The earth white, snow to the thickness of many feet on all. Life none; not a beast of the earth, nor a fowl of the air, nor the hum of an insect. Solitude. Cold—grey, pitiless cold. Night is approaching.

The hill ranges which backbone the American continent—the northern extremity of the Rocky Mountains. The barrier which confronts the traveller as he journeys from the Yukon Valley to the Alaskan seaboard. Land where the foot of man but rarely treads. And mid-winter.

But now, in the dying light of day, a man comes slowly, painfully into the picture. What an atom in that infinity of awful grandeur. One little life in all that desert of snow and ice. And what a life! The poor wretch was swathed in furs, snow-shoes on his feet, and a long staff lent his drooping figure support. His whole attitude told its own tale of exhaustion. But a closer inspection, one glance into the fierce-burning eyes, which glowered from the depths of two cavernous sockets, would have added a sequel of starvation. The eyes had a frenzied look in them, the look of a man without hope, but with

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still that instinct of his burning in his brain. Every now and again he raised one tilted head and pressed it to nose and cheeks. He knew his face was frozen, but he had no desire to stop to thaw it out. He was beyond such trifles. His upturned storm collar had become matted with icicles about his mouth, and the fur was frozen soundly to his chin whisker, but he gave the matter no heed.

The man tottered on, still onward with the dogged persistence which the inborn love of life inspires. He longed to rest, to seat himself upon the snow just where he happened to be, to indulge that craving for sleep which was upon him. His state of exhaustion fostered these feelings, and only his brain fought for him and clung to life. He knew what that drowsy sensation meant. He was slowly freezing. To rest meant sleep, to sleep meant death.

Slowly he dragged himself up the inclining ledge he was traversing. The path was low at the base of one of the loftiest crags. It wound its way upwards in such a fashion that he could see little more than fifty yards ahead of him ere it turned away to the left as it skirted the hill. He was using his last reserve of strength, and he knew it. At the top he stood half dead. Two mountains rose sheer up to dizzy heights on one side, and a precipice was on the other. He turned his dreadful eyes this way and that. Then he scanned the prospect before him— a base of dandy outlined mountains. He glanced back, tracing his uneven tracks until they disappeared in the grey evening light. Then he turned back again to a contemplation of what lay before him. Suddenly his staff slipped from his hand as though he no longer had the strength to grasp it. Then raising his arms as if, he gave vent to one despairing cry in which was expressed all the pent up agony of his soul. It was the cry of one from whom all hope had gone.

"God! God have mercy on me! I am lost— lost!"

The despairing note echoed and re-echoed among the hills. And as each echo came back to his dulled ears it was as though some invisible being mocked him. Suddenly he braced himself and his mind obtained a momentary triumph over his physical weakness. He stooped

to recover his staff. His limbs refused to obey his will. He stumbled. Then he crumpled and fell in a heap upon the snow.

Al was silent and he lay quite still. Death was grasping him, and he knew it. Presently he wearily raised his head. His gazed averted him with eyelids more than half closed. Is it worth the struggle? <sup>A</sup> he seemed to say, "is there any hope?" He felt so warm, so comfortable, out there in the better winter air. Where had been the use of his efforts? Where the use of the gold he had so laboriously collected at the new Eldorado? At the thought of his gold his spirit tried to rouse him from the sleep with which he was threatened. His eyelids opened wide, and his eyes, from which intelligence was fast disappearing, found in their giant sockets. His body heaved as though he were about to rise, but beyond that he did not move.

As he lay there a sound reached his numbed ears. Clear through the crisp night air it came with the keen, keen and piercing intonation which is only obtained in the stillness of such latitudes. It was a human cry—a long drawn "whoop." Like his own cry it echoed amongst the hills. It only needed such as this to support the inclinations of the sufferers' will. His head was again raised. And in his wild eyes was a look of alertness—hope. He listened. He counted the echoes as they came. Then, with an almost superhuman effort, he struggled to his feet. New life had come to him born of hope. His weakened frame answered to his great effort. His heart was throbbing wildly.

As he stood up the cry came to him again, nearer this time. He moved forward and rounded the bend in the path. Again the cry. Now just ahead of him. He answered it with joy in his tone and shouldered on. Now two dark figures loomed up in the grey twilight. They were moving swiftly along the ledge towards him. They tried out something in a foreign tongue. He did not understand, but his joy was no less. They came up, and he saw before him the short, stout figures of two fur-clad Eskimos. He was saved.

Inside a small dugout a dingy oil lamp shed its murky

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rays upon squalid surroundings. The place was reeking with the offensive odours exhaled from the burning oil. The atmosphere was stifling.

There were four occupants of this abode and stretched in various attitudes on dusty blankets spread upon the ground they presented a strange picture. Two of these were Eskimos. The broad, flat faces, sharp noses, and heavy lips were unmistakable, as were their dusky, greasy skins and squat figures. A third man was something between the white man and the redskin. He was in the centre of a half-breed, and though not exactly pleasant to look upon, he was certainly interesting as a study. He was lying with limbs outstretched and his head propped upon one hand while his gaze was directed with thoughtful intensity towards a small, fierce burning camp-stove, which, at that moment, was rendering the hut so unbearably hot.

His face was sallow and indented with smallpox scars. He had no hair upon it except a tuft or two of steel ring, which the ravages of disease had condensed to leave to him. His nose, which was his best feature, was heavy but beautiful in outline, but his mouth was wide, with a lower lip that sagged loosely from its fellow above. His head was small and was burdened with a crown of lank black hair which had been allowed to grow Indian-like until it hung upon his shoulders. He was of medium height and his arms were of undus length.

The other occupant of the dog-hut was our traveller. He was stretched upon a blanket on which was spread his fur coat, and he was alternating between the disposal of a bowl of steaming soup and gazing with the catching pause caused by his recent shadowed-out front teeth.

The soup warmed his staring body, and his pain increased proportionately. In spite of the latter however he felt very much alive. Occasionally he glanced round upon his silent companions. Whenever he did so one or the other, or both of the Eskimos were gazing steadily at him.

He was rather a good looking man, notwithstanding his now unkempt appearance. His eyes were large, very large in their hollow sockets. His nose and cheeks were, at present, a mass of blisters from the thawing



frost-bites, and his mouth and chin were hidden behind a curtain of whisker of about three weeks' growth. There was no mistaking him for anything but an Anglo-Saxon, and a man of considerable and very fine proportions.

When his soup was finished he set the bowl down and leaned back with a sigh. The pock-marked man glanced over at him.

"More?" he said, in a deep, not unmusical, tone.

The half-starved traveller nodded, and his eyes sparkled. One of the Eskimos rose and re-filled the bowl from a tin camp-kettle which stood on the stove. The famished man took it and at once began to sup the invigorating liquid. The agonies of his frost-bites were terrible, but the pangs of hunger were greater. By and by the bowl was set down empty.

The half-breed sat up and crossed his legs, and leant his body against two sacks which contained something that crackled slightly under his weight.

"Give you something more solid in an hour or so. Best not have it too soon," he said, speaking slowly, but with good enunciation.

"Not now?" said the traveller, in a disappointed tone.

The other shook his head.

"We're all going to have supper then. Best wait." Then, after a pause: "Where from?"

"Forty Mile Creek," said the other.

"You don't say! Alone?"

There was a curious saving of words in this man's mode of speech. Possibly he had learned this method from his Indian associates.

The traveller nodded.

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"The sea-coast."

The half-breed laughed gutturally.

"Forty Mile Creek. Sea-coast. On foot. Alone. Winter. You must be mad."

The traveller shook his head.

"Not mad. I could have done it, only I lost my way. I had all my stages thought out carefully. I tramped from the sea-coast originally. Where am I now?"

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The half breed eyed the speaker curiously. He seemed to think well before he answered. Then:

"Well, in a few miles of the land of the north."

An impressive silence followed. The half breed continued to eye the other man and to judge from the expression of his face his thoughts were not altogether unimportant. He watched the weary face before him until the eyes gradually closed and in spite of the burning pain of the frost bites, exhaustion did its work and the man slept. He waited for some moments listening to the heavy regular breathing, then he turned to his camp. He sat for a long and carefully in a curious log fire. One of the Eskimo men and removed a piece of corn from a sack in the wall. Then he placed in the camp kettle on the stove. Then he took a tin bowl and dipped it from a bucket containing beans that had been set to cook. These also were in the camp kettle. Then the Indian threw himself down again upon his blankets and for some time the three men continued to converse in low tones. They glanced frequently at the sleeper and occasionally gripped out a curious throaty chuckle. Their whole attitude was furtive, and the man slept on.

As he passed to the third one more than half gone. The last reached with the smell of cooking victuals. The Eskimo who seemed to act as cook occasionally looked into the camp kettle. The other two were lying on their blankets sometimes conversing but more often silent gazing silently before them. At length the cook uttered a sharp exclamation and lifted the steaming kettle from its place on the stove. Then he produced four deep porridge from a sack and four greasy looking spoons. From another he produced a pile of bannocks. "Hard tack" well known on the northern trails.

Supper was ready, and the pork marked man laid out and crouched the traveller.

"Food," he said ironically, as the startled sleeper rubbed his eyes.

The man sat up and gazed begrudgingly at the lean pot. The Indian served out the pork with ruthless hands. A knife divided the porridge into four and he placed one in each paunch. Then he poured the beans and soup

over each portion. The biscuits were placed within reach, and the supper was served.

The sick man devoured his uncouth food with great relish. The soup which had been first given him had done him much good, and now the "solid" completed the restoration so opportunely begun. He was a vigorous man, and his exhaustion had chiefly been brought about by lack of food. Now, as he sat with his empty pannikin in front of him, he looked gratefully over at his rescuers, and slowly munched some dry biscuit, and sipped occasionally from a great beaker of black coffee. Life was very sweet to him at that moment, and he thought joyfully of the belt inside his clothes laden with the golden result of his labours on Forty Mile Creek.

Now the half-breed turned to him.

"Feeling pretty good?" he observed, conversationally.

"Yes, thanks to you and your friends. You must let me pay you for this." The suggestion was coarsely put, returning strength was restoring the stranger to his usual condition of mind. There was little refinement about this man from the Yukon.

The other waived the suggestion.

"Sour-belly's pretty good tack when y' can't get any better. Been many days on the road?"

"Three weeks." The traveller was conscious of three pairs of eyes fixed upon his face.

"Hoofing right along?"

"Yes. I missed the trail nearly a week back. Followed the track of a dog train. It came some distance this way. Then I lost it."

"Ah! Food ran out, maybe?"

The half-breed had now turned away, and was gazing at the stove as though it had a great fascination for him.

"Yes, I meant to make the Pass where I could lay in a fresh store. Instead of that I wandered on till I found the empty pack got too heavy, then I left it."

"Left it?" The half-breed raised his two little tufts of eyebrows, but his eyes remained staring at the stove.

"Oh, it was empty—clean empty. You see, I didn't trust anything but food in my pack."

"No. That's so. Maybe gold isn't safe in a pack?"

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The pock-marked face remained turned towards the glowing stove. The man's manner was quite indifferent. It suggested that he merely wished to talk.

The traveller seemed to draw back into his shell at the mention of gold. A slight pause followed.

"Maybe you ain't been digging up there?" the half-breed went on presently.

"It's rotten bad digging on the Creek," the traveller said, clumsily endeavouring to evade the question.

"So I've heard," said the half-breed.

He had produced a pipe, and was leisurely filling it from a pouch of antelope hide. His two companions did the same. The stranger took his pipe from his fur coat pocket and cut some tobacco from a plug. This he offered to his companions, but it was rejected in favour of their own.

"The only thing I've had that and my fur coat—to keep me from freezing to death for more than four days. Haven't so much as seen a sign of life since I lost the dog track."

"This country's a terror," observed the half-breed emphatically.

All four men lit their pipes. The sick man only drew once or twice at his, then he laid it aside. The process of smoking caused the blisters on his face to smart terribly.

"Gives you face gyp," said the half-breed, sympathetically. "Best not bother to smoke to-night."

He pulled vigorously at his own pipe, and the two Indians followed suit. And gradually a pleasant odour, not of tobacco but some strange perfume, disguised the reek of the atmosphere. It was pungent but delightful, and the stranger remarked upon it.

"What's that you are smoking?" he asked.

For one instant the half-breed's eyes were turned upon him with a curious look. Then he turned back to the contemplation of the stove.

"Kind o' weed that grows around these wilds," he answered. "Only stuff we get hereabouts. It's good when you're used to it." He laughed quietly.

The stranger looked from one to the other of his three companions. He was struck by a sudden thought.

"What do you do here? I mean for a living?"

"Trap," replied the Breed shortly.

"Many furs about?"

"Fair."

"Slow work," said the stranger, indifferently.

Then a silence fell. The warfarer was getting very drowsy. The pungent odour from his companion's pipe seemed to have a strangely soothing effect upon him. Before he was aware of it he caught himself nodding, and try as he would he could not keep his heavy eyelids open. The men smoked on in silence. Three pairs of eyes watched the stranger's efforts to keep awake, and a malicious gleam was in the look with which they surveyed him. He was too sleepy to observe. Besides, had he been in position to do so, the expression of their eyes would probably have been different. Slowly his head drooped forward. He was dreaming pleasantly already, although as yet he was not quite asleep. Now he no longer attempted to keep his eyes open. Further his head drooped forward. The three men were still as mice. Then suddenly he rolled over on one side, and his stertorous breathing indicated a deep, unnatural slumber.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hut was in darkness but for a beam of light which made its way in through a narrow slit over the door. The sunlight shone down upon the huddled figure of the traveller, who still slept in the attitude in which he had rolled over on his fur coat when sleep had first overcome him. Otherwise the hut was empty. The half breed and his companions had disappeared. The fire was out. The lamp had burned itself out. The place was intensely cold.

Suddenly the sleeper stirred. He straightened himself out and turned over. Then without further warning he sat up and found himself staring up at the dazzling streak of light.

"Daylight," he murmured, "and they've let the stove go out. Gee! but I feel queer about the head."

Moving his head so that his eyes should miss the glare of light, he gazed about him. He was alone, and as he realized this he scrambled to his feet, and, for the moment, the room—everything about him—seemed to be turning

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topsy-turvy. He placed his hand against the post which supported the roof and steadied himself.

"I wonder where they are?" he muttered. "Ah of course," as an afterthought, "they are out at their traps. They might have stoked the fire. It's perishing in here. I feel beastly queer; must be the effects of starvation."

Then he moved a step forward. He brought up suddenly to a standstill. His two hands went to his waist. They moved, groping round it spasmodically. Undoing his clothes he passed his hands into his shirt. Then one word escaped him. One word almost a whisper—but conveying such a world of fierce, horror-stricken intensity—

"Robbed!"

And the look which accompanied his exclamation was the look of a man whose mind is distracted.

So he stood for some seconds. His lips moved, but no words escaped them. His hand remained within his shirt, and his fingers continued to grope about mechanically. And all the time the dazed, strained look burned in his great, roving eyes.

It was gone. That broad belt, weighted down with the result of one year's toil, gold dust and nuggets, was gone. Presently he seated himself on the cold iron of the stove. Thus he sat for an hour, looking straight before him with eyes that seemed to draw closer together, so intense was their gaze. And who shall say what thoughts he thought, what wild schemes of revenge he planned? There was no outward sign. Just those silent moving lips.

## CHAPTER II

MR. LACHARY SMITH

"Rot, man, rot! I've been up here long enough to know my way about this devil's country. No confounded neche can teach me. The trail forked at that bush we passed three days back. We're all right. I wish I felt as sure about the weather."

Leslie Grey broke off abruptly. His tone was resentful, as well as dictatorial. He was never what one might call an easy man. He was always headstrong, and never failed to resent interference on the smallest provocation. Perhaps these things were in the nature of his calling. He was one of the head Customs officials on the Canadian side of the Alaskan boundary. His companion was a subordinate.

The latter was a man of medium height, and from the little that could be seen of his face between the high folds of the storm-collar of his buffalo coat, he possessed a long nose and a pair of dark, keen, yet merry eyes. His name was Robb Chillingwood. The two men were tramping along on snow-shoes in the rear of a dog train. An Indian was keeping pace with the dogs in front, the latter, five in number, harnessed in the usual tandem fashion to a heavily-laden sled.

"It's no use anticipating bad weather," replied Chillingwood, quietly. "But as to the quest on of the trail——"

"There's no question," interrupted Grey, sharply.

"Ah, the map shows two clumps of bush. The trail turns off at one of them. My chart says the second. I studied it carefully. The 'confounded neche,' as you call him, says 'not yet.' Which means that he considers it to be the second bush. You say no."

"The neche only knows the trail by reputa. You

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have never been over it before. I have travelled it six times. You make me tired. Give it a rest. Perhaps you can make something of those nasty, sharp puffs of wind which keep lifting the ground snow at intervals."

Robb shrugged his fur-coated shoulders, and glanced up at the sun. It seemed to be struggling hard to pierce a grey haze which hung over the mountains. The sun-dogs, too, could be seen, but, like the sun itself they were dim and glowed rather than shone. That patchy wind, so well known in the west of Canada, was very evident just then. It seemed to hit the snow-bound earth, either viciously along the surface, sweep up a thin cloud of loose surface snow, then drop in an instant, but only to operate in the same manner at some other spot. This was going on spasmodically in many directions, the snow brushing up in hissing eddies at each attack. And slowly the grey mist on the hills was obscuring the sun.

Robb Chillingwood was a man of some experience on the prairie, although, as his companion had said, he was new to this particular mountain trail. To his trained eye the outlook was not encouraging.

"Storm," he observed shortly.

"That's my opinion," said Grey definitely.

"According to calculations, if we have not got off the trail," Chillingwood went on, with a sly look at his superior, "we should reach Dougal's roadside hostelry in the Pass by eight o'clock - well before dark. We ought to escape the storm."

"You mean we shall," said Grey pointedly.

"If——"

"Bunkum!"

The two men relapsed into silence. They were very good friends these two. Both were used to the strenuous northern winter. Both understood the dangers of a blizzard. Their argument about the trail they were on was quite a friendly one. It was only the dictatorial manner of Leslie Grey which gave it the appearance of a quarrel. Chillingwood understood him, and took no notice of his somewhat irascible remarks, whilst, for himself, he remained of opinion that he had read his Ordnance chart aright.

They tramped on. Each man, with a common thought,



was watching the weather indications. As the time passed the wind "patches" grew in size, in force, and in frequency of recurrence. The haze upon the surrounding hills rapidly deepened, and the air was full of frost particles. A storm was coming on apace. Nor was Dougal's wayside hostelry within sight.

"It's a rotten life on the boundary," said Robb, as though continuing a thought aloud.

"It's not so much the life," replied Grey vindictively, "it's the d——d red tape that demands the half yearly journey down country. That's the dog's part of our business. Why can't they establish a branch bank up here for the bullion and send all 'returns' by mail? There is a postal service—of a kind. It's a one-horsed lay-out—Government work. There'll come a rush to the Yukon valley this year, and when there's a chance of doing something for ourselves—having done all we can for the Government—I suppose they'll shift us. It's the way of Governments. I'm sick of it. I draw four thousand dollars a year, and I earn every cent of it. You——"

"Draw one thousand, and think myself lucky if I taste fresh vegetables once a week during the summer. Say, Leshe, do you think it's possible to assimilate the humble but useful hog by means of a steady diet of 'sour-belly'?"

Grey laughed.

"If that were possible I guess we ought to make the primest bacon. Hallo, here comes the d——d neche. What's up now, I wonder? Well, Rainy-Moon, what is it?"

The Indian had stopped his dogs and now turned back to speak to the two men. His face was expressionless. He was a tall specimen of the Cree Indian.

"Ugh," he grunted, as he came to a standstill. Then he stretched out his arm with a wide sweep in the direction of the mountains. "No good, white-men—coyote, yes. So," and he pointed to the south and made a motion of running, "yes. Plenty beef, plenty fire-water. White-man store." His face slowly expanded into a smile. Then the smile died out suddenly and he turned to the north and made a long 'soo-o-o-sh' with rising intona-

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tion, signifying the rising wind. "How very bad. White man sleep sleep. Wake—no." And he finished up with a shake of the head.

Then his arm dropped to his side, and he waited for Grey to speak. For a moment the Customs officer remained silent. He hoped and waited anxiously. Both men understood the Indian's meaning. The Indian would believe the man to be right about the trail. As to the coming storm, and the probable consequences if they were caught in it, that was patent to all three.

But Grey, with characteristic pigheadedness, gave no heed to the superior intelligence of the Indian where matters of direction in a wild country were concerned. He knew he was on the right trail. That was sufficient for him. But he surveyed the surrounding mountains well to fore he spoke. They had halted in a sort of cup-like hollow, with towering walls surmounted by huge glaciers down which the wind was now whistling with various forces. There were only two exits from this vast arena. The one by which the travellers had entered it, and the other directly ahead of them. The latter was only to be approached by a wide ledge which skirted one of the mountainsides and inclined sharply upwards. Higher up the mountain slope was a belt of pinewoods, rising to which was a stubby growth of low bush. This was curiously black in contrast with the white surroundings, for no snow was upon its woody branches and shrivelled, discoloured leaves. Suddenly while Grey was looking out beyond the dog trail, he observed the impress of snow shoes in the snow. He pointed to them and drew his companion's attention.

"You see," he said triumphantly, "there has been some one passing this way just ahead of us. Look here, echo, you just get right on and don't let us have any more nonsense about the trail."

The Indian shook his head.

"Oo," he grunted. "This little—just little." Then he pointed ahead. "Big, white, all white. No, no, white man no come this way. Runby echo so," and Runby Mow made a motion of lying down and sleeping. He meant that they would get lost and die in the snow.

Grey became angry.

"Get on," he shouted. And Hainy-Moss reluctantly turned and started his dogs afresh.

The little party ascended the sloping path. The whipping snow lashed their faces as the wind rushed it up from the ground in rapidly thickening clouds. The three quats were concentrating into a steady shrieking blast. A grey cloud of snow, thin as yet, but plainly perceptible, was in the air. The threat it conveyed was no idle one. The terror of the blizzard was well known to those people. And they knew that in a short space they would have to seek what shelter they might chance to find upon these almost barren mountains.

The white men tightened the woollen scarves about the storm collars of their coats, and occasionally beat their putted hands against their sides. The gathering wind was intensifying the cold.

"If this goes on we shall have to make that belt of pinewoods for shelter," observed Robb Chillingwood practically. "It won't do to take chances of losing the dogs—and their load—in the storm. What say?"

They had rounded a bend and Grey was watchfully gazing ahead. He did not seem to hear his companion's question. Suddenly he pointed directly along the path towards a point where it seemed to vanish between two vast crags.

"Don't," he said. And his tone conveyed that he wished his companions to understand that he, Grey, had been right about the trail, and that Robb had been wrong. "That's Dougal's store," he went on, after a slight pause.

Chillingwood looked as directed. He saw the rush of smoke which, in the rising storm, was richly swept from the mouth of a piece of upright stove pipe, which in the now grey surroundings could just be distinguished.

"But I thought there was a broad, open trail at Dougal's," he said, at last, after gazing for some moments at the tiny smoke-stack.

"Maybe the road opens out here," answered Grey weakly.

But it didn't. Instead it narrowed. And as they ascended the slope it became more and more precipitous. The storm was now beating up, seemingly from every

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direction, and it was with difficulty that the five great hounds hauled their burden in the face of it. However, Ray Moon urged them to their task with an light hand and just as the storm settled down to its work in right good earnest they drew up abreast of a small dugout. The path had narrowed down to barely six feet in width bordered on the left hand by a sharp slope upwards towards the pine-wood he labored and on the right by a sheer precipice, whilst fifty feet further on there was no more path, just space. As this became apparent to him, Rabb Chillingwood could not help wondering what their fate might have been had the storm overtaken them earlier and they had not come upon the dugout. However he had no time for much speculation on the subject for as the dogs came to a stand the door of the dugout was thrown back and a tall, miscrevous looking man stood framed in the opening.

"Kind o' struck it lucky," he observed, without any great show of enthusiasm. "Come right in. The dogs can take the dogs round the side there pointing to the left of the dugout. There's a weatherproof shack there where I keep my binding. Guess he can fix up in that till this storm blows himself out. You've missed the trail I take it. Come right in."

Half an hour later the two Customs officers were seated with their host round the camp stove which stood burning and spitting in the centre of the hut. The dogs and Ray Moon were housed in the vestibule.

Now that the travelers were divested of their heavy furs, their appearance was less picturesque but more presentable. Rabb Chillingwood was about twenty five, his whole countenance indicated a sturdy bonosity of thought and a merry disposition. There was considerable strength too about brow and jaw. Luke Grey was shorter than his companion. A man of dapper, sturdy figure and with a face good looking, obstinate and displaying as much traces of humor as a barbed wire fence post. He was fully thirty years of age.

There had passed a long, attenuated, but powerful figure, and a face chiefly remarkable for its miscrevous features and a pair of hungry eyes and a dark chin-whisker.

"Yea, sir," this individual was saying, "she's goin' to howl good and hard for the next forty-eight hours, or I don't know three parts. Maybe you're from the valley?"

Chillingwood shook his head.

"No. Fact Cudaby way," he said. "My name's Chillingwood Robb Chillingwood. This is Mr. Leake Gray, Customs officer. I am his assistant."

The long man glanced slowly at his guests. His great eyes seemed to take in the details of each man's appearance with solemn curiosity. Then he twisted slowly upon the upturned box on which he was seated and crossed his legs.

"I'm pleased to meet you, gentlemen. It's lonely in these parts—lonely." He shuddered as though with cold. "I've been trapping in these latitudes for a considerable period, and it's—lonely. My name is Zachary Smith."

As the trapper pronounced his name he glanced keenly from one to the other of the two men beside him. His look was suggestive of doubt. He seemed to be trying to reassure himself that he had never before crossed the paths of these chance guests of his. After a moment of apprehensive silence he went on slowly, like one groping in darkness. His confidence was not fully established.

"You can make up your minds to a couple of days in this shanty—anyhow. I mostly live on 'sour-belly' and 'hard tack.' Don't sound inviting, eh?"

Chillingwood laughed pleasantly.

"We're Government officials," he said with meaning.

"Yea," put in Grey. "But we've got plenty of canned truck in our baggage. I'm thinking you may find our supplies a pleasant change."

"No doubt no doubt whatever. Cat's meat would be a delicacy after—months of tallowy pork."

This slow spoken trapper surveyed his guests thoughtfully. The travellers were enjoying the comforting shelter and warmth. Neither of them seemed particularly talkative.

Presently Grey roused himself. Extreme heat after extreme cold always has a somnolent effect on those who experience it.

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"We'd best get the—stuff off the sleigh, Chillingwood," said he. "Rainy Moon's above the average Indian for honesty, but, nevertheless, we don't need to take chances. And," as the younger man rose and stretched himself, "food is good on occasions. What does Mr. Zachary Smith say?"

"Ay, let's sample some white-man's grub. Gentlemen, this is a fortunate meeting—all round."

Chillingwood passed out of the hut. As he opened the door a vindictive blast of wind swept a cloud of snow in, and the frozen particles fell crackling and hissing upon the glowing stove.

"And they call this a white-man's country," observed Mr. Smith pensively, as the door closed again. He opened the stove and proceeded to knock the embers together preparatory to stoking up afresh.

"Guess you were making for the Pass," he said conversationally.

"Yes," replied Grey.

"Missed the trail," the other said, pushing a cordwood stick accurately into the centre of the glowing embers.

Grey made no answer.

"Isn't in the way of Governments to show consideration to their servants," Mr. Smith went on, filling the stove with fuel to the limit of its holding capacity. "It's a deadly season to be forced to travel about in."

"Consideration," said Grey bitterly. "I'm forced to undertake this journey twice a year. Which means I am on the road the best part of my time. And merely because there is no bank or authorized place for depositing.—"

"Ah, gold," put in Mr. Zachary Smith quietly.

"And reams of 'returns.'"

"They reckon that the 'rush' to the Yukon'll come next year. Maybe things will alter then."

Smith straightened himself up from his occupation. His face displayed but the most ordinary interest in the conversation.

At that moment Chillingwood returned bearing two small brass-bound chests. The Indian followed him bringing a number of packages of tinned food. Smith glanced from the chests—which were as much as Chilling-

would could carry to the angular proportions of the Lufkin's ladder, then back again to the chest. He seemed listlessly as the officer began, the latter, then set off back to the stove and opened the door per

There found a man of whom all three partook with that restlessness which comes of an appetite induced by a hardy and active life. They talked but little while they ate, and that little was of the prospects of the new trade. Luke Grey spoke with the bitterness of a disappointed man. In reality he had been successful in the course he had adopted. But some men are born grumblers, and he was one. It is probable that had he been born a prince he would have heavily lamented the fact that he was not a king. Chillingwood was different, he was contented the situation and enjoyed his life. He was contented with faithfully doing that which he regarded his duty, but to himself then to his employers. His method of life was something like that of the same. He fully appreciated the merits of the seafaring gentry—one hand for himself and one for his employers. When it came to both hands he set. He meant to break away from his present environment when the "Yukon" rush was on. In the meantime he was on the spot. Mr. Zachary Smith cheerfully listened. He could eat and watch the guests. He could study them. And he seemed to be as inclined to waste his time on words when he could do the other two things. He said little about himself, and was mainly contented with comprehensive nods and grunts, whilst he devoured large portions of tinned tongue and swam-wed bumpers of scalding tea.

After dinner the travellers produced their pipes. Grey offered his tobacco to their hosts. Mr. Zachary Smith shook his head.

"I've run up tobacco recently," he said glancing in the direction of the door, which groaned under a sudden attack from the storm which was now howling with terrible force outside. "It isn't that I don't like it. But when a man gets cooped up in these huts he's like to run out of it, and then it's uncomfortable. I've taken on a native weed which does me for smoking when I need it. It isn't often. It grows hereabouts and won't like to give out. Guess I won't smoke now."

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Grey shrugged and lit his pipe. If any man could be loud enough to reject testimony Leslie Grey was not the sort of man to press him. He was interested in it as in any one but himself. The ground sucked luxuriously at his pipe and the fighting things.

The blue smoke coils curled incessantly about the heads of the smokers, and rose heavily upon the denser atmosphere of the hut. The two men stretched themselves indolently upon the ground, sometimes a waking, but for the most part a sleep. There was a certain thought-bubble of time. They had a certain task to perform which the elements permitted they would carry out in due course. In the meantime it was sleeping and they had been fortunate in finding shelter in these wastes of snow and ice. They were glad to accept what comfort came their way. This relief need delay would find a stripe record in Leslie Grey's report to his superiors. "Doing to a heavy strain etc." They were to permanent servants. The nature of these men's labor was all very monotonous, but they were used to it, and use as a wonderful thing. It so closely burdened on content.

Cards were produced later on. Mr. Zachary Smith revealed the little shrews of "nut-throat" snakes. He had no money to spare for gambling, he informed his guests, he would look on. He sat over the stove whilst the others played. Later on the cards were put away and the travelers, curling themselves into their blankets composed themselves to sleep.

The man figure sat silently blinking at the red coils of the fire box. His legs were crossed and he curved his knee in a restful embrace. For nearly an hour he sat thus, and only the slow movement of his great rolling eyes, and an occasional inclination of his head toward the active thought which was passing behind his mask-like features.

As he sat there he looked older by half a score of years than either of his companions. But in reality, he was a young man. The furrows and hollows upon his face were the marks of privation and exposure, not of age. His bowed figure was not the result of weakness or senility, it was chiefly the result of great height and the slouching gait of one who has done much slow tramping. His



Zachary Smith made an interesting study as he sat silently beside his stove.

His face was the face of an honest man—when his eyes were concealed beneath their heavy lids. It was a good face, and refined, tough, vigorous, honest, until the eyelids were raised. Then the expression was utterly changed. A something looked out from those great rolling eyeballs which was furtive, watchful, doubtful. They were eyes one sometimes sees in a madman or a great criminal. And now, as he sat absorbed in his own reflections, their gaze alternated between the two brass-bound chests and the recumbent figure of Leslie Grey.

So he sat, this self-styled Zachary Smith, trapper.

## CHAPTER III

### MR. ZACHARY SMITH SMOKES

It was the third morning of the travellers' sojourn, in Mr Smith's dugout. Two long idle days had been spent in the fetid atmosphere of the trapper's half-buried house. During their enforced stay neither Grey nor his subordinates had learnt much of their reticent host. It is doubtful if they had troubled themselves much about him. He had greeted them with a sort of indifferent hospitality, and they were satisfied. It was not in the nature of their work to question the characters of those whom they encountered upon their journey. To all that he had Mr Zachary Smith had made them welcome, they could expect no more, they needed no more. Now the day had arrived for their departure, for the storm had subsided and the sun was shining with all its wintry splendour.

The three men leisurely devoured an early morning breakfast.

Mr Smith was quite cheerful. He seemed to be labouring under some strange excitement. He looked better, too, since the advent of his guests. Perhaps it was the result of the ample supplies of canned provisions which the two men had lavished unsparingly upon him. His face was less cadaverous, the deep searing furrows were less pronounced. Altogether there was a marked improvement in this solitary dweller in the wild. Now he was discussing the prospects of the weather, whilst he partook liberally of the food set before him.

"These things aren't like most storms," he said. "They blow themselves out and have done with it. They don't come back on you with a change of wind. That isn't the way of the blizzard. We've got a clear spell

of a fortnight and more before us—with luck. Now, which way may you be taking, gentlemen? are you going to head through the mountains for the main trail, or are you going to double on your tracks?"

"We are going back," said Grey, with unpleasant emphasis. Any allusion to his mistake of the road annoyed him.

Chillingwood turned his head away and hid a smile.

"I think you will do well," replied the trapper largely. "I knew these hills, and I should be inclined to back back to where you missed the trail. I hope to cover twenty miles myself to-day."

"Your traps will be buried, I should say," suggested Robb.

"I'm used to that," replied the tall man quietly. "Guess I shan't have much difficulty with 'em." He permitted himself the suspicion of a smile.

Grey drew out his pipe, and leisurely loaded it. Robb followed suit. Mr. Zachary Smith pushed his pannikin away from before him and leaned back.

"Going to smoke?" he asked. "Guess I'll join you. No, not your plug, thanks. I'm feeling pretty good. My weed'll do me. You don't fancy to try it?"

"T and B.'s good enough for me," said Grey, with a smile. "No, I won't experiment."

Smith held his pouch towards Chillingwood.

"Can I?"

Robb shook his head with a doubtful smile.

"Guess not, thanks. What's good enough for my chief is good enough for me."

The trapper slowly unfolded an antelope-hide pouch of native workmanship. He emptied out a little pile of greenish-brown flakes into the palm of his hand. It was curious, dusty-looking stuff, suggestive of discoloured bran. This he poured into the bowl of a well-worn briar, the mouthpiece of which he carefully and with accuracy adjusted into the corner of his mouth.

"If you ever chance to have the experience I have had in these mountains, gentlemen," he then went on slowly, as gathering into the palm of his hand a red hot cinder from the stove he tossed it to and fro until it lodged on the bowl of his pipe, "I think you'll find the

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use of the weed which grows on this hillside," with a jerk of his head upwards to indicate the bush which flourished in that direction, "has its advantages."

"Maybe," said Grey contemptuously.

"I doubt it," said Robb, with a pleasant smile.

The lean man knocked the cinder from his pipe and emitted a cloud of pungent smoke from between his lips. The others had lit up. But the odour of the trapper's weed quickly dominated the atmosphere. He talked rapidly now.

"You folks who travel the main trails don't see much of what is going on in the mountains—the real life of the mountains," he said. "You have no conception of the real dangers which these hills contain. Yes, sir, they're hidden from the public eye, and only get to be known outside by reason of the chance experience of the traveller who happens to lose his way, but is lucky enough to escape the pitfalls with which he finds himself surrounded. I could tell you some queer yarns of these hills."

"Travellers' tales," suggested Grey, with a yawn and a disparaging smile. "I have heard some."

"Yes," said Robb, "there are queer tales about adventures encountered by travellers journeying from the valley to the coast. But they're chiefly confined to way-side robbery, and are of a very sordid, everyday kind. No doubt your experiences are less matter-of-fact and more romantic. By Jove, I feel jolly comfy. Not much like turning out."

"That's how it takes me," said Smith quietly, but with a quick glance at the speaker. "But idleness won't hold my pet. It's a remarkable thing that I've felt wonderfully energetic these last few days, and now that I have to turn out I should prefer to stop where I am. I s'pose it's human nature."

He gazed upon his audience with a broad smile.

At that moment the loud yelping of the dog penetrated the thick sides of the dog-out. Rainy Moon was preparing for the start. Doubtless the brilliant change in the weather had inspired the savage burden-bearers of the north.

"That's curious-smelling stuff, you're smoking," said

Grey, rousing himself with an effort after a moment's dead silence. "What do you call it?"

"Can't say—a weed," said Zachary Smith, glancing down his nose towards the bowl of his pipe. "Not bad, is it? Smells of almonds—tastes like nutty cherry."

Grey stifled a yawn.

"I feel sleepy—d—d sleepy. Wonder if Rainy-Moon has got the sleigh loaded?"

Smith emitted another dense cloud of smoke from between his pursed lips, he seemed wrapt in the luxurious enjoyment of his smoke. Hobbs Chillingwood's eyelids were drooping and his pipe had gone out. Quite suddenly the trapper's eyes were turned on the face of Grey and the smoke from his pipe was chiefly directed towards him.

"There's time enough yet," he said quietly. "Half an hour more or less won't make much difference to you on the road. You were talking of travellers' tales, and I reckon you were thinking of fairy yarns that some folks think it smart to spin. Well, maybe those same stories have some foundation in fact, and ain't all works of imagination. Anyhow, my experience has taught me never to disbelieve until I've some good sound grounds for doing so."

He paused and gazed with a far-off look at the opposite wall. Then a shadowy smile stole over his face, and he went on. His companions' heads had drooped slowly forward, and their eyes were heavy with sleep. Grey was fighting against the drowsiness by jerking his head sharply upwards, but his eyes would close in spite of his efforts.

"Well, I never thought that I'd get caught napping," continued Smith, with a chuckle. "I thought I knew these regions well enough, but I didn't. I lost my way, too, and came near to losing my life——"

He broke off abruptly as Hobbs Chillingwood slowly rolled over on his side and began to snore loudly. Then Smith turned back to Leslie Grey, and leaning forward, so that his face was close to that of the officer, blew clouds of the pungent smoke right across the half-stupefied man's mouth and nostrils.

"I lost other things," he then went on meditatively, "but not my life. I lost that which was more precious

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to me. I lost gold—gold! I lost the result of many weary months of toil. I had hoarded it up that I might go down to the east and buy a nice little ranch, and settle down into a comfortable respectable man of property. I didn't even wait until the spring opened so that I could take the river route. No, that wasn't my way, because I knew it would cost a lot of money and I wasn't overburdened with wealth. I had just enough —”

He puffed vigorously at his pipe. Grey's head was now hanging forward and his chin rested on his chest.

There came the sound of Ratty Moun's voice adjuring the dogs outside the door of the dugout. The trapper's eyes flashed evilly in the direction of the unconscious Indian.

“—to do what I wanted,” he resumed. “No more—no less, and I set out on foot.” He was anxiously watching for Grey's collapse. “Yes, I was going to tramp to the sea-coast through these mountains. I hit the wrong trail, deceived by a false track carefully made by those who waited for me in these halls.” Grey was swaying heavily and his breathing was stertorous. “I met my fate and was robbed of my gold. I was drugged—as you poor fools are being drugged now. When it was too late I discovered how it was done and determined to do the same thing by the first victim that fell into my clutches. I tried the weed and soon got used to its fumes. Then I waited—waited. I had set my decoy at the cross roads and you—you—came.”

As the trapper ceased speaking Grey slowly rolled over, insensible.

In a moment the watching man was upon his feet. His whole face was transfigured. Alertness was in every movement, in every flash of his great eyes. He moved quickly across the floor of the hut and took two shallow panskins from the sack which lay upon the floor, dropped some of the flaky weed into the bottom of each one, and then from the stove he scraped some coals of fire into them. The fire set the dry weed smouldering, and the thick smoke rose heavily from the two tins. These he placed upon the ground in such a position that his hard-breathing victims should thoroughly inhale the fumes. Thus he would make doubly sure of them.

This done he stood erect and gazed for some seconds at the result of his handiwork. He was satisfied but there was no look of pleasure on his face. He did not look like a man of naturally criminal instincts. There was nothing savage about his expression, or even coldness. His look merely seemed to say that he had set himself this task, and so far what he had done was satisfactory in view of his object. He turned from the heavy alighting men and his eyes fell upon the two small grid chests. Instantly his whole expression changed. Here was the keynote to the man's destination. 'Grid!' It was the grid he coveted. At all costs that grid was to be his. It came above with greed. He moved toward the boxes as though he were about to handle them; but he paused abruptly before he reached them. The barking of the dogs and the strident tones of the Indians' voices outside arrested him. He suddenly remembered that he had not yet completed his work.

Now he moved with unnecessarily stealthy steps over to the darkest corner of the hut, to where a rule of rough skin stood. The steady nerve which had hitherto served him seemed in a measure to have weakened. It was a phase which a man of his stamp must inevitably pass through in the perpetration of a first crime. He was assailed by a sensation of watching eyes following his every movement, with a feeling that another presence than those two alighting forms hovered with him in the dim light of the dim light. He was haunted by his other self, the moral self.

From beneath the pile of furs he drew a heavy revolver which he carelessly examined. The chambers were loaded.

Again came the sound of the dogs outside. And he even fancied he heard the shuffling of Mary Moon's moccasins over the beaten snow just outside the door. He turned his face in the direction. The expression of his great hungry eyes was malevolent. Whatever moral fear might have been his, there could be no doubt that he would carry his purpose out. He gripped his pistol firmly and moved towards the door.

As his hand rested on the latch he paused. Just for one instant he hesitated. It seemed as though all that was honest in him was making one final appeal to the

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evil passions which swayed him. His eyelids lowered suddenly as though he could not even face the dim light of that gloomy interior. It was the attitude of one who fully realizes the nature of his art and, of one who shrinks from the light of honest purpose and prefers the obscure recesses of his own moral darkness. Then with an effort he pulled himself together, he gripped his nerve. The next moment he flung wide the door.

A flood of winter sunlight poured the interior of the dugout. The glare of the crystal white earth was dazzling to a degree, and the hungry-looking trapper stood blinking in the light. His field was encroached behind him. The sleigh was before the door. Harry Wilson stood on the far side of the path in the act of hitching the dogs up. One of the animals, the largest of them all, was already harnessed, the others were clanking or squeaking around him, a leash by the Indian.

When he heard the door open Harry Wilson backed up from his work. He was standing with his back to the precipice which bordered the narrow ledge. His great stoic face expressed nothing but solemn gravity. He gazed and turned again to his work.

Like a flash the trapper's pistol flared from behind him, and its report rang out echoing and re-echoing amongst the surrounding hills. There was an answering cry of pain from the harnessed dog, and Harry Wilson with a yell stood erect to find himself gazing into the muzzle of the revolver. The expression of the trapper's face was reluctant now. His first shot had been fired under the influence of excitement, and he had missed his object and only wounded the dog. Now it was different.

Again the pistol rang out. Harry Wilson gave one sharp cry of pain and sprang backwards into space. In one hand he gripped the handle of the dogs. The other clutched wildly at the air. For one instant his fall was broken by his hold upon the four dogs, then the suddenness of his precipitation and his weight told, and the poor beasts were dragged over the side of the chasm after him.

The whole dastardly act was but the work of a moment.

The next all was silent save for the gulping of the wounded dog lying upon the snow.



The trapper stood for a moment framed in the doorway. The horror of his crime was upon him. He waited for a sound to come up to him from below. He longed to, but he dared not, look over the side of the yawning chasm. He feared what awful sight his eyes might encounter. His imagination conjured up pictures that turned him sick to the stomach, and a great dread came over him. Suddenly he turned back into the hut and slammed the door.

The wounded dog had not changed its attitude. The moments sped by. Suddenly the poor beast began to struggle violently. It was a huge specimen of the timber breed except small powerful and wolfish in its appearance. The wretched brute roared incessantly, but its pain only made it struggle the harder to free itself from its harness. At length it succeeded in wrenching out of the primitive "breast draw" which held it. Then the suffering beast lunged painfully away down the path. Fifty yards from the hut it quailed upon its haunches and began to lick its wounded soul. And every now and then it would cease its licking operation to throw up its long muzzle and emit one of those drawn-out howls, so dismal and departing in which dogs are able to express their morbid feelings.

At length the hut door opened again and the trapper came out. He was equipped for a long journey. Thick blanket shape covered his legs, and a great fur coat reached to his knees. His head was buried beneath a heavier cap, which, pressed low down over his ears, was overlapped by the collar of his coat. He carried a roll of blankets over his shoulder and a pack on his back. As he came out into the sun he looked fearfully about him. There stood the loaded sleigh quite undisturbed. The harness alone was rumpled about by reason of the wounded dog's struggles. And there was a pool of canine blood upon the snow and a faint trail of sanguinary hue leading from it. The man eyed this and followed its direction until he saw the dog crouching down further along the path. But he was not thinking of the dog. He turned back to the sleigh, and his eyes wandered across, beyond it, to the brink of the precipice. The only marks that had disturbed the smooth white

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edge of the path were those which had tumbled the snow where the dogs had been dragged to their fate. Otherwise there was no sign.

The man stepped forward as though to look down to the depths below, but, as he neared the edge, he halted shudderingly. Nor did his eyes turn downwards, he looked around him, above him; but not down. He gazed long and earnestly at the hard, cold, cloudless sky. His brow frowned with unpleasant thought. Then his lips moved, and he muttered words that sounded as though he were endeavouring to justify his acts to himself.

"The gold was mine. Justly mine. It was wrested from me. It may be Christian to submit without retaliation. It is not human. What is a heche's life—nothing. Pooh! An Indian life is of no value in this country. Come on, let's go."

He spoke as though he were not alone. Perhaps he was addressing that moral self of his which kept reminding him of his in words. Anyhow, he was uncomfortable, and his words told of it.

He stooped and adjusted his snow-shoes, after which he gripped his long staff and slowly began his journey down the hill.

He quickly got into his stride, that forward, leaning attitude of the snow-shoer, nor did he glance to the left or right.

Straight ahead of him he stared, over the jagged rampart of mountains to the clear steel blue of the sky above. He was leaving the scene of his crime, he wished also to leave its memory. He gave no heed to the trail of blood that stained the whiteness of the snow beneath his feet; his thoughts were not of the present—his present, his mind was travelling swiftly beyond. The whining of the dog as he passed him fell upon ears that were deaf to all entreaty.

The crystal covered earth glided by him, the long, reaching stride of the expert snow-shoer bore him rapidly along.

He paused in the valley below and took fresh bearings. He intended to stride through the heart of the mountains. The Pass was his goal, for he knew that there lay the main trail he sought.

He went about for the landmarks which he had located during his long tenancy of the digout. Not a branch of a tree rustled. Not a breath of air fanned the steaming breath which poured from his lips. His mind was centred on his object, but the nervous realization of loneliness was upon him.

Suddenly the awful stillness was broken. The man bent his head in a listening attitude. The sound came from behind and he turned sharply. His movement was hurried and anxious. His nerves were not steady. A long drawn out wail rose upon the air. Fifty yards behind stood the wounded bound gazing after him as if he, too, were endeavouring to ascertain the right direction. The creature was standing upon three legs; the fourth was hanging useless, and the blood was dripping from the frozen limb.

The man turned away with an impatient shrug and stepped out bravely. He knew his direction now, and resolutely centred his thoughts upon his journey. Past experience told him that this would tax all his energy and endurance and that he must keep a clear head for he was not a native of the country, nor had the last net of one whose life had been passed in a mountainous world. Once he turned at the sound of a plaintive whining and to his annoyance he saw that the dog was following him. A half nervous laugh escaped him, but he did not pause. He had hitherto forgotten the creature, and this was an unpleasant reminder.

An hour passed. The exhilarating exertion had cleared the atmosphere of the man's thoughts. Once only he looked back over his shoulder as some memory of the dog flashed across his brain. He could see nothing but the immaculate gleam of snow. Something of the purity of his surroundings seemed to communicate itself to his thoughts. He found himself looking forward to a life the honest, respectable life which the burden he carried in his pack would purchase for him. He saw himself the owner of vast tracts of pasture, with stock grazing upon it, a small but comfortable house and a wife. He pictured to himself the joys of a pastoral life, a community in which his opinions and influence would be matters of importance. He would be looked up to,

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and gradually, as his wealth grew, he would become interested in the world of politics and his country.

He was dragged back to the present by a memory of the shame of the disgust, and quite suddenly he broke into a cold perspiration. He increased his pace and did these passages various again return to him. It was well past noon when at last he halted for food and rest.

He devoured his supper far more heartily but he gained no enjoyment therefrom. He was miserable. At that moment he hated life, he hated himself for his weak yielding to the power of circumstance, he hated the snow and ice about him for their demoralizing effect upon the world through which he was passing, he hated the dreadful solitude with which he was surrounded.

Presently he drew out a pipe. He looked at it for one instant then raised it to his lips. He smoked it and with a mixture of disgust and a better courage he threw it from him. It rested on the snow he had found at the log-cabin.

Now he was seized with a feverish restlessness, and was about to rise to his feet. Suddenly out on the still, icy air wafted the faintest long-drawn note of warning. To his startled fancy it came like a dreadful signal of some awful doom. It seemed an undulating wave of sound, dying away hard, as though it were with to leave the material surroundings. He turned in the direction where it proceeded and slowly into view crept the shadowed bulk of a jagged mountain of every step.

At that moment the man was greatly astonished for what he did. He was beside himself with dread. The solitude was on his nerves, the haunting dog his own reflections, all had combined to lead him to the verge of nervous prostration. With the last dying sound his heavy revolver was leveled in the direction of the on-coming hound. There was a moment's pause, then a shot rang out and the dog stood quite still. The bullet fell short and only kicked up the snow some yards in front of the animal, nor did the blast display the least sign of fear. The man prepared to take another shot, but as he was about to fire his arm dropped to his side, and with a murmur which he put the pistol away.

"The dog did not move to show the range of a gun," he muttered, with an uneasy look at the motionless

gesture. His words were an apology to himself, although perhaps he would not have admitted it.

The dog resumed its rigid attitude. Its head was slightly lowered and its wicked grey eyes glared ferociously. Its thick mane bristled and it looked like a gaunt, hungry wolf bounding upon the trail of some unwelcome traveler. So long as the man stood, so long did the dog remain still and silent. But as the hunter returned to his seat and began to pack up, the dog began to whine and furtively draw nearer.

Although he did not look up the man knew that the animal was coming towards him. When he had finished packing he straightened himself. The dog was within a few paces of him. He raised gently and the animal responded with a whimper but remained where it was. Its ear no sound was evidently distant, and the man was bound to take the creature. Whatever may have been his intention in the first place, he now exhibited a curious display of feeling for one who could plan and perpetrate so deliberately a crime as that which he had committed at the depot. Human nature is a strange blending of good and evil passions. Two minutes ago the man would, without the least remorse, have shot the dog. Now as he reached him and he listened to the heart's piteous cry, he stretched out his arm and stretched its trembling side, and then stooped to examine the wounded limb. And stranger still he tore off a portion of the swollen scarf that encircled his waist and proceeded to bandage up the shattered member. The dog submitted to the operation with languid resignation. The foot of one hind leg had been entirely torn away by a revolver shot, and only the stump of the leg was left. The poor beast would go on three legs for the rest of his life.

When the man had finished he rose to his feet, and a better laugh shivered the surface of the snow-bound world.

"There, you miserable cur! It's better like that than to get the cold into it. I've had some bronchitis, I don't intend to damage you. If you're going to travel with me you'd best come along and be damned to you."

And he walked back to where his pack and blankets lay, and the dog hopped at his heels.

## CHAPTER IV

### 'YELLOW BOOKING—SLUMP IN GREY

THE days are long since gone when the name of the midland territory of the great Canadian world, Manitoba, suggested to the uninitiated nothing but Red Indians, buffalo and desperadoes of every sort and condition. Now-a-days it is well known, even in remote parts of the world, as one of the earth's greatest granaries, a land of rolling pastures, golden cornfields and prosperous, simple farm folk. In a short space of time, little more than a quarter of a century, this section of the country has been elevated from the profound obscurity of a lawless wilderness to one of the most thriving provinces of a great dominion. The old Fort Garry, one of the oldest factories of the Hudson's Bay Company, has given place to the magnificent city of Winnipeg, with its own University, its own governing assembly, its own clubs, hotels, its own world wide commercial interests, besides being the great centre of railway traffic in the country. All these things, and many other indications of splendid prosperity too numerous to mention, have grown up in a little over twenty-five years. And with this growth the buffalo has gone, the red man has been herded on to a limited reservation, and the "Bad-man" is almost an unknown quantity. Such is the Manitoba of to-day.

But during the stages of Manitoba's transition its history is interesting. The fight between law and lawlessness was long and arduous, the pitched battles many and frequent. Buffalo could be killed off quickly, the red-man was but a poor thing after the collapse of the Hiel rebellion, but the "Bad-man" died hard.

This is the period in the history of Manitoba which

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at present interests us. When Winnipeg was building with a rapidity almost recalling that of the second Chicago, and the army of water farmers in the land was being heavily augmented by recruits from the mother country. When the military police had withdrawn their forces to the North West Territories leaving only detachments to hold the American border against the depredations which both countries were equally anxious to be rid of.

In the remote south-eastern corner of the province, forty-five miles from the nearest town, which happened to be the village of Assiniboia, lay a farmstead on the crest of a far-reaching prairie, as swell of rolling prairie bare to the blast of the four winds except for the insignificant shelter of a small bluff on its north-eastern side stood a large farm house surrounded by a small village of barns and outbuildings. It was a typical Canadian farm of the older, western type. One of those places which have grown by degrees from the one central bit of log-cabin and thatch to the more pretentious proportions of the modern frame building of red pine weather boarding with shingled roofing to match, and the whole coloured with paint of a deep, port wine hue, the joints and angles being picked out with a gleaming white. It was a farm, but there be no mistake, and not merely a homestead.

There were abundant signs of prosperity in the trim, well-groomed appearance of the place. The unmistakable hall mark was to be found in the presence of a steam thrasher buried beneath a covering of tarpaulin and snow, in the array of farming machinery and in the mass of pastures enclosed by top-raised barbed wire fencing. All these things, and the extent of the buildings, told of years of strenuous industry and thrift, of able management and a proper pride in the results of its owner.

Nor were there outward signs in any way misleading. Silas Maung in his lifetime had been one of those sound-minded men, unimaginative and practical, the dominant note of whose creed had always been to do his duty in that state of life in which he found himself. The son of an early pioneer he had been born to the life of a farmer, and, having the good fortune to follow in the footsteps

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of a thrifty father, he had lived long enough to see his farm grow to an extent many times larger and more prosperous than that of any neighbor within a radius of a hundred miles. By the time of our story he had been gathered to his fathers; his poverty-stricken wife and his worthy spouse, Ho, Hsueh Maing, regarded as his stead-fast friend with an equally practical hand, and fortune had continued to smile upon her. Her bank balance had grown by leaps and bounds, and she was known to be one of the richest women in Northern Mantou, and her only daughter, Prudence, to be heiress to no inconsiderable fortune. There was much in the family, but he had endowed the farm, his land, and passing out of the home circle as some part was had gone into the world to seek his own way, his own experience of life.

In spite of the wealth of the owners of Loon Dyke Farm they were very simple, unpretentious folk. They lived the life they had always known, abiding by the customs of childhood and the country to which they belonged with the whole-hearted regard which is now becoming so regrettable rare. Their world was a whole, one which provided them with all they needed for thought, labor and recreation. To journey to Winnipeg, a distance of a hundred and twenty miles, was an event which required two days' preparation and as many weeks of consideration. A busy one of these little border villages which dot the international boundary dividing Canada from the United States, was a place rarely visited by them, and when undertaken the trip was regarded as a notable event.

Just now Mrs. Maing was a prey to the wildest excitement. An event was about to happen which interested her to a degree. It is doubtful as to what feeling was uppermost, a hot motherly mood. She was torn between many conflicting emotions: joy, grief, pleasurable excitement. Her daughter, her only child, as she was wont to confide to her maternal friends for her boy, whom she loved as only a mother can love a son, she believed she would never see again, was about to be married.

No visit to town, not even a sea voyage across the ocean could possibly compare with this. It was a more significant event in her life even than when she went into



Winneg to choose the monument which was to be erected over the grave of her departed Sam. That she had always had in her mind was not because she looked forward to his demise, but because she hoped some day to share with him its sheltering canopy. But somehow this fathering marriage of her daughter was in the nature of a shock to her. She was not mercenary, far from it, she was above any such motive as that, but she had hoped, when the time came for such matters to be considered, that Prudence would have married a certain rancher who lived out by the Lake of the Woods, a man of great wealth and a man whom Mrs. Maing considered desirable in every way. Instead of that Prudence had chosen for herself amongst her many suitors, and worst of all she had chosen an insignificant official in the customs department. That to Hephzibah Harding was the worst blow of all. With proper motherly pride she had hoped that "her girl" would have married a "some one" in her own world.

The winter evening shadows—it was the middle of January and winter still held sway upon the prairie—were falling and the parlour at the farm was enveloped in a grey dusk. The room was large, low-ceiled, and of irregular shape.

It was furnished to serve many purposes, principally with a view to solid comfort. There was no blatant display of wealth and every article of furniture bore signs of long though careful use. The spotless boarded floor was bare of carpet, but was strewn with rough-cured skins, timber wolf, antelope, coyote and bear, and here and there rugs of undoubted home make, those latter of the patchwork order. The centre table was of wide proportions and of solid mahogany and 'told of the many services of the apartment, the small chairs were old-fashioned mahogany pieces with horsehair seats, while the easy chairs—and there were several of these—were expensive and of diverse descriptions. A well worn sofa was stowed away in an obscure angle and a piano with a rose silk front and fretwork occupied another of the many dark corners which the room possessed.

The whole atmosphere of the place was of extreme comfort. The bare description of furniture conveys

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nothing but the comfort was there and showed out in the odds and ends of family possessions which were in evidence everywhere: the grandfather's clock, the sewing machine, the quaint old oil lamp upon the mantel, bowed over the place where the fire should have been but was not, the soft hangings and curious old family pictures and discoloured engravings, the perfect femininity of the room. In all respects it was a Canadian farm "best parlour."

There were four occupants of the room. Two old ladies, rotund and garbed in modest refinement of some sort of dark clinging material, were gathered about the monster self-feeding stove, seated in arm chairs in keeping with their ample proportions. One was the widow of the late Niles Mallory, and the other was the school-ma'am from the Leominster school-house. This good lady received in the name of the teacher of Mrs. Gurridge was the oldest friend of Hephzibah Mallory, a fact which spoke highly for the former good dame's many excellent qualities. Hephzibah was not a woman to set her affections on her sex without good reason. Her moral standard was high, and though she was ever ready to show kindness to her fellow-creatures, she was far too practical and honest herself to take to her motherly bosom any one who was not worthy of regard.

As was natural they were talking of the forthcoming marriage, and the tone of their lowered voices indicated that their remarks were in the nature of confidences. Mrs. Mallory was sitting bolt upright, and her plump, rather rough hands were folded in her broad lap. Mrs. Gurridge was leaning towards the stove, gazing into the fire through the mica-eyes of the fire-box.

"I trust they will be happy," said Mrs. Gurridge, with a sigh. Then, as an after thought, "He seems all right."

"Yes," Mrs. Mallory said with a responsive exhalation, "I think so. He has few faults. But he is not the man to follow my Niles on this farm. I truly believe, Sarah, that he couldn't tell the difference between a cabbage-field and a potato patch. These what-d'you-call 'em, Civil servants, are only fit to tot up figures and play around with a woman's wardrobe every time she crosses the border. Thank goodness I'm not of the travelling

that, I'm sure I should hide my face for very shame every time I saw a Customs officer."

The round, rosy face of the farm wife assumed a drooping hue, and her still comely lips were pursed into an indignant pout. Her smooth grey head, adorned by a black lace cap trimmed with pearl beads, was turned in the direction of the two other occupants of the room, who were more or less buried in the obscurity of a distant corner.

For a moment she gazed at the dimly outlined figure of a man who was seated on one of the leather hair chairs, leaning towards the sofa on which reclined the form of her daughter, Prudence. His elbows were resting on his knees and his chin was supported upon his two clenched fists. He was talking earnestly. Mrs. Mailing watched him for some moments, then her eyes drifted to the girl, the object of her solicitude.

Although the latter was in the shadow her features were, even at this distance, plainly discernible. There was a strong resemblance between mother and daughter. They were both of medium dark complexion with strong colouring. Both were possessed of delightful sweet brown eyes, and mouths and chins firm but chape. The one remarkable difference between them was in the nasal organ. While the mother's was short, well rounded, and what one would call pretty though ordinary, the girl's was prominent and equine with a decided bridge. This feature gave the younger woman a remarkable amount of character to her face. Altogether here was a face which, wherever she went, would inevitably attract admiring attention. Just now she was evidently teasing the man before her, and the mother turned back to the stove with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

"I think Prudence will teach him a few lessons," she murmured to her friend.

"What—about the farm?"

"Well, I wasn't just thinking of the farm."

The two ladies smiled into each other's faces.

"She is a grand child," observed Mrs. Curridge affectionately, after awhile.

"Or she wouldn't be her father's child."

"Or your daughter, Hephzibah," said Sarah Curridge sincerely.

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The two relapsed into silence. The glowing coals in the stove shrank lower and received augmentation from the supply above. Darkness was drawing on.

Prudence was holding the *Free Press* out towards the dying light and the man was protesting. The latter is already known to us. His name was Leslie Grey, now an under-official of the Customs department at the border village of Ainsley.

"Don't strain your eyes in this light, dear," he was saying. "Beude, I want to talk to you." He laid his hand upon the paper to take it from her. But the girl quickly withdrew it out of his reach.

"You must let me look at the personal column, Leslie," she said teasingly. "I just love it. What do you call it? The 'Agony' column, isn't it?"

"Yes," the man answered, with some show of irritation. "But I want—"

"Of course you do," the girl interrupted. "You want to talk to me—very right and proper. But listen to this."

Grey bit his lip. Prudence bent her face close to the paper and read in a solemn whisper—

"'Yellow booming—slump in Grey.' Now I wonder what that means? Do you think it's a disguised love message to some forlorn damsel in the east, or does it conceal the heartrending cry of a lost soul to some fond but angry parent?" Then as the man did not immediately answer, she went on with a pucker of thought upon her brow. "'Yellow'—that might mean gold. 'Booming'—ah, yes, the Kootenai mines, or the Yukon. There is going to be a rush there this year, isn't there? Oh, I forgot," with a real contrition. "I mustn't mention the Yukon, must I? That is where your disaster occurred that caused you to be banished to the one-horned station of Ainsley."

"Not forgetting the reduction of my salary to the princely sum of two thousand dollars per annum," Grey added bitterly.

"Never mind, old boy. It brought us together, and dollars aren't likely to trouble us any. But let me get on with my puzzle. 'Slump in Grey.' That's funny, isn't it? 'Slump' certainly has to do with business.

I've seen 'Slump' in the finance columns of the *Toronto Globe*. And then 'Grey.' That's your name."

"I believe so."

"Um. Guess I can't make much of it. Seems to me it must be some business message. I call it real disappointing."

"Perhaps not so disappointing as you think, sweetheart," Grey said thoughtfully.

"What, do you understand it?" The girl at once became all interest.

"Yes," slowly, "I understand it, but I don't know that I ought to tell you."

"Of course you must. I'm just dying of curiosity. Besides," she went on coaxingly, "we are going to be married, and it wouldn't be right to have any secrets from me. Dear old Curridge never lost an opportunity of firing sage maxims at us when I used to go to her school. I think the one to suit this occasion ran something like this—

'Secrets withheld 'twixt man and wife  
Infallibly end in conjugal strife.'

She always made her rhymes up as she went along. She's a sweet old dear, but so funny."

But Grey was not heeding the girl's chatter. His face was serious and his obstinate mouth was tight-shut. He was gazing with introspective eyes at the paper which was now lying in the girl's lap. Suddenly he leaned further forward and spoke almost in a whisper.

"Look here, Prue, I want you to listen seriously to what I have to say. I'm not a man given to undue hopefulness. I generally take my own way in things and see it through, whether that way is right or wrong. So far I've had some successes and more failures. If I were given to dreaming or repining I should say Fate was dead against me. That last smasher I came in the mountains, when I lost the Government bullion, nearly settled me altogether, but, in spite of it all, I haven't given up hope yet, and what is more, I anticipate making a big coup shortly which will reinstate me in favour with the heads of my department. My coup is in connection

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with the notice you have just read out from the 'Agony' column."

The girl nodded. She was quite serious now. Grey paused, and the ticking of the grandfather's clock on the other side of the room pounded heavily in the twilight. The murmur of the old ladies' voices occasionally reached the lovers, but it did not interrupt them or divert their attention from their own affairs.

"That notice," Grey went on, "has appeared at regular intervals in the paper and is a message to certain agents from a certain man, to say that certain illicit work has been carried out. I have discovered who this man is and the nature of his work. It does not matter who he is or what the work, in fact it would be dangerous to mention either, even here, the point is that I have discovered the secret, and I alone, am going to benefit by my discovery. I am not going to let any one share the reward with me. I want to associate myself with the authorities, and to regain my lost position, then no one will be able to say things about my marriage with you."

"No one had better say anything against you in my hearing anyway, Leslie," the girl put in quickly. "Because I happen to be rich—or shall be—so nothing to do with any one but myself. As far as I am concerned it will be a blessing. Go on."

"No doubt it is as you say, dear," the man pursued; "but there are plenty of people unkind enough to believe that I am marrying you for your money. If worse, I am going to get this man red-headed, and, I tell you, it will be the greatest coup of my life."

"I hope you will succeed, Leslie," the girl said, her brown eyes fixed in admiration upon her lover. "Do you know I never thought you were such a determined fellow," she added impulsively. "Why I can almost believe that you'd learn to farm if you took the notice."

Grey's sense of humour was not equal to the occasion, and he took her remark quite seriously.

"A man must be a fool if he can't run a farm," he said roughly.

"Many folks labour under that mistake," the girl replied. Then: "Say, when are you going to do this thing?"

"Strangely enough, the critical moment will come two days after our marriage. Let's see. This is Monday. We are to be married to-morrow week. That will make it Thursday week."

The girl sat herself up on the sofa, and her young face expressed dismay.

"Right in the middle of our honeymoon. Oh, Leshe!"

"It can't be helped, dearest. I shall only be away from you for that afternoon and the night. Think of what it means to me. Everything."

"Ah, yes." She sank back again upon the sofa. There was the faintest glimmer of a smile in the depths of her dark eyes. "I forgot what it meant to you."

The unconscious irony of her words fell upon stony ground.

Prudence Mallory was deeply in love with Leslie Grey. How few men fully appreciate the priceless treasure of a good woman's regard.

"If I bring this off it means immediate promotion," Grey went on, in his blindly selfish way. "I must succeed. I hate failure."

"They will take you off the border, then," said the girl musingly. "That will mean—leaving here."

"Which also means a big step up."

"Of course—it will mean a big step up."

The girl sighed. She loved the farm, that home which she had always known. She changed the subject suddenly.

"It must be nearly tea-time. We are going to have tea early, Leshe, so that we can get through with it comfortably before the people come."

"Oh yes, I forgot you are having a 'Progressive Euchre' party to-night. What time does it begin? I mean the party."

"Seven o'clock. But you are going to stay to tea?"

Grey glanced up at the yellow face of the grandfather's clock and shook his head.

"Afraid not, little girl. I've got some work to do in connection with Thursday week. I will drop in about nine o'clock. Who're coming?"

"Is it really necessary, this work?" There was a touch of bitterness in Prudence's voice. But the next

moment she went on cheerfully. She would not allow herself to stand in her lover's way. "The usual people are coming. It will be just our monthly gathering of neighbouring—mossbacks," with a laugh. "The Turners, the Furrers—Peter Furrers, of course, he still hopes to cut you out—and the girl's old Gleichen and his two sons, Harry and Tim. And the Ganthorns from Roachbank and their cousins the Covills of Lakeville. And I almost forgot him—mother's flame, George Iredale of Lonely Ranch."

"Is Iredale coming? It's too bad of you to have him here, Prue. Your mother's flame—um, I like that. Why, he's been after you for over three years. It's not right to ask him when I am here, besides——" Grey broke off abruptly. Darknews hid the angry flush which had spread over his face. The girl knew he was angry. His tone was rude, and there was no mistaking Leslie Grey's anger. He was very nearly a gentleman, but not quite.

"I think I have a perfect right to ask him, Leslie," she answered seriously. "His coming can make no possible difference to you. Frankly, I like him, but that makes no difference to my love for you. Why you dear, silly thing, if he asked me from now till Donnyday I wouldn't marry him. He's just a real good friend. But still, if it will please you, I don't mind admitting that mother insisted on his coming, and that I had nothing to do with it. That is why I call him mother's flame. Now, then, take that ugly frown off your face and say you're sorry."

Grey showed no sign of obedience, he was very angry. It was believed and put about by the busy bodies of the district, that George Iredale had sought Prudence Malling in marriage ever since she had grown up. He was a bachelor of close upon forty. One of those quiet, determined men, slow of speech, even clumsy, but quick to make up their minds, and endowed with a great tenacity of purpose. A man who rarely said he was going to do a thing, but generally did it. These known features in a man who, up to the time of the announcement of Prudence's engagement to Grey, had been a frequent visitor to the farm, and who was also well known to be



wealthy and more than approved of by Mrs. Malling, no doubt gave a certain amount of colour to the belief of those who chose to pry into their neighbours' affairs.

"Anyway I don't think there is room for both Iredale and myself in the house," Grey went on heatedly. "If you didn't want him you should have put your foot down on your mother's suggestion. I don't think I shall come to-night."

For one moment the girl looked squarely into her lover's face and her pretty lips drew sharply together. Then she spoke quite coldly.

"You will—or I'll never speak to you again. You are very foolish to make such a fuss."

There was a long silence between the lovers. Then Grey drew out his watch, opened it, glanced at the time, and snapped it close again.

"I must go," he said shortly.

Prudence had risen from the sofa. She no longer seemed to heed her lover. She was looking across the darkened room at the homely picture round the glowing stove.

"Very well," she said. And she moved away from the man's side.

The two old ladies pausing in their conversation heard Grey's announcement and the answer Prudence made. Sarah Gurnidge leaned towards her companion with a confidential movement of the head. The two grey heads came close together.

The school-ma'am whispered impressively—

"'Maid who angers faithful swain  
Will shed more tears and know more pain  
Than she who loves and loves in vain.'"

Hephzibah laughed tolerantly. Sarah's earnestness never failed to amuse her.

"My dear," the girl's mother murmured back, when her comfortable laugh had gurgled itself out, "young folks must skit-skat and bicker, or where would be the making up? La, I'm sure when I was a girl I used to tweak my poor Silas's nose for the love of making him angry—Silas had a long nose, my dear, as you may remember. Men hate to be tweaked, especially on their

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weak points. My Silas was always silly about his nose. And we never had less than half-an-hour's making up. I wonder how Prudence has tweaked Mr. Grey—I can't bring myself to call him Leslie, my dear."

Prudence had reached her mother's side. The two old heads parted with guilty suddenness.

"Oh, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Malling, "how you did startle me."

"I'm sorry, mother," the girl said, "but I wanted to tell you that Leslie is not coming to-night," Prudence turned a mischievous face towards her lover.

Mrs. Malling wrinkled up her smooth forehead. She assumed an air of surprise.

"Why not, my child?"

"Oh, because you have asked Mr. Iredale. Leslie says it isn't right."

Prudence was still looking in her lover's direction. He had his back turned. He was more angry than ever now.

"My dears," said her mother with an indulgent smile, "you are a pair of silly noodies. But Mr. Grey—I mean Leslie—must please himself. George Iredale is coming because I have asked him. This house is yours to come and go as you like—er—Leslie. George Iredale has promised to come to the cards to-night. Did I hear you say you were going now? I should have taken it homely if you would have stayed to tea. The party begins at seven, don't forget."

Three pairs of quizzical eyes were fixed upon Grey's good looking but angry face. His anger was against Prudence entirely now. She had made him look foolish before these two ladies, and that was not easily to be forgiven. Grey's lack of humour made him view things in a ponderous light. He felt most uncomfortable under the laughing gaze of those three ladies.

However, he would not give way an inch.

"Yes, I must go now," he said ungraciously. "But not on account of George Iredale," he added blunderingly. "I have some important work to do——"

He was interrupted by a suppressed laugh from Prudence. He turned upon her suddenly, glared, then walked abruptly to the door.

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"Good bye," he exclaimed shortly, and the door closed sharply behind him.

"Why, Prudence," said Mrs. Malling, turning her round laughing face to her daughter and indicating the door. "Aren't you——"

"No, I'm not, mother dear," the girl answered with a forced laugh.

Sarah Curridge patted her late pupil's shoulder affectionately. But her head shook gravely as though a weight of worldly wisdom was here.

"I don't think he'll stay away," said the mother, with a tender glance in the girl's direction.

"He hasn't chin enough," said Sarah, who prided herself upon her understanding of physiognomy.

"Indeed he has," retorted Prudence, who heard the remark.

Mrs. Malling was right, Leslie Grey was not going to stay away. He had no intention of doing so. But his reasons were quite apart from those Mr. bubba Malling attributed to him. He wished to see George Iredale, and because of the man's warning Grey would forego his angry desire to retaliate upon Prudence. He quite ignored what he was pleased to call his own pride in the matter. He would come because he had what he considered excellent reasons for so doing.

Prudence lit the lamps and laid the table for tea. Her mother ambled off to the great kitchen as fast as her bulk would allow her. There were many things in that wonderful place to see to for the supper, and on these occasions Mrs. Malling would not trust their supervision even to Prudence, much less to the hired girl, Mary. Sarah Curridge remained in her seat by the stove watching the glowing coals dreamily, her mind galloping ahead through fanciful scenes of her own imagination. Had she been asked she would probably have stated that she was looking forward into the future of the pair who were so soon to be married.

Prudence went on quietly and wisely with her work. Presently Sarah turned and after a moment's intent gaze at the trim, rounded figure, said in her profoundest tone—

"Harvest your wheat ere the August frost,  
One breath of cold and the crop is lost."

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"Oh, bother—there, I've set a place for Leslie," exclaimed Prudence in a tone of vexation. "What is that about 'frost' and 'lost'?"

"Nothing, dear, I was only thinking aloud." And Sarah Gurrige relapsed into silence, and continued to bask in the warm glow of the stove.

## CHAPTER V

### THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

GREY strode away from the house in an very amiable frame of mind. A fenced in patch, planted with blue-gums and a mass of low-growing shrubs, formed a sort of garden in front of the farm.

This enclosure was devoid of all artistic effect, but in summer-time it served as a screen to break the rigour of the wooden farm-buildings. It was a practical but incongruous piece of man's handiwork, divided down the centre by a pathway bordered with overlapped hoppings of bent red willow switches, which, even in winter, protruded hideously above the beaten snow. The path led to a front gate of primitive and hald manufacture, but stout and serviceable, as was everything else about the farm. And this was the main approach to the house.

It was necessary for Grey, having taken his departure by the front door, to pass out through this gate in order to reach the barn where he had left his saddle-horse. He might have saved himself this trouble by leaving the house by the back door, which opened out directly opposite the entrance to the great barn. But he was in no mood for back doors; the condition of his mind demanded nothing less than a dignified exit, and a dignified exit is never compatible with a back door. Had he left Lone Dyke Farm in an amiable frame of mind, much that was to happen in his immediate future might have been different.

But the writing had been set forth, and there was no altering it.

He walked with a great show of unnecessary energy. It was his nature to do so. His energy was almost painful to behold. Too much vigour and energy is

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almost worse than chronic indolence, sooner or later people are afflicted and themselves in difficulties.

It was more than a year since his misadventure in the mountains. He had suffered for his own wrong-headedness over that matter, but he had not profited by his experience, he was incapable of doing so. His length of service and reputation for hard work had saved him from dismissal, but Chillingwood was less fortunate, subordinate in Government service generally are less fortunate when their superiors blunder.

However, Grey had survived that unpleasantness. He was not the man to brood over disaster. Soon after he had been transferred to Anney the Town Clerkship fell vacant. He did what he could for Chillingwood with the result that the younger man eventually secured the post, and thus found himself enjoying a bare sustenance on an income of \$500 per annum.

Halfway down the path Grey became aware of a horseman approaching the farm. The figure was moving along slowly over the trail from Anney. In the dusk the horse appeared to be jaded, its head hung down, and its gait was ambling. The stranger was tall, but beyond that Grey could see nothing for the face was almost entirely hidden in the depths of the storm collar of his coat. The officer looked hard at the newcomer. It was part of his work to know, at least by sight every inhabitant of his district. This man was quite a stranger to him. The horse was unknown to him, and the fur coat was unfamiliar. In winter these things usually mark a man out to his acquaintances. The horse shows up against the snow and the prairie man does not usually possess two fur coats.

On the stranger's first appearance Grey's thoughts had at once flown to George Ireland, but now as he realized that the man was unknown to him, his interest revived. However, he waited slowly on to the gate so that he might obtain a closer inspection. Horse and rider were about twenty-five yards off when Grey reached the gate, and he saw that they were followed at some distance by a great wolfish-looking hound.

The evening shadows had grown rapidly. The grey veil of snow-clouds above made the twilight much

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darker than usual. Grey waited. The traveller silently drew up his horse, and for a moment sat gazing at the figure by the gate. All that was visible of his face was the suggestion of a nose and a pair of large dark eyes.

Grey opened the gate and passed out.

"Evening," said the horseman, in a voice muffled by the fur of his coat-collar.

"Good evening," replied Grey shortly.

"Lamb Dyke Farm," said the stranger, in a tone less of inquiry than of making a statement.

Grey nodded, and turned to move away. Then he seemed to hesitate and turned again to the stranger. Those eyes! Where had he seen just such a pair of eyes before? He tried to think, but somehow his memory failed him. The horseman had turned his face towards the house and so the great roving eyes were hidden. But Grey was too intent upon the business he had in hand to devote much thought to anything else.

There was no further reason for remaining, he had satisfied his curiosity. He would learn all about the stranger later on.

He hurried round to the stables. When he had gone the stranger dismounted, for a moment or two he stood with one hand on the gate and the other holding the horse's reins, gazing after the retreating form of the Customs officer. He waited until the other had disappeared, then leisurely hitched his horse's reins on to the fence of the enclosure, and, passing in through the gate, approached the house. Presently he saw Grey ride away, and a close observer might have detected the sound of a heavy sigh escaping from between the embracing folds of the fur collar as the man walked up the path and rapped loudly upon the front door with his muffled fist. The three fatal words had closed up on his master, and now stood beside him.

Prudence opened the door. Tea was just ready; and she answered the summons, half expecting to find that her lover had thought better of his ill humour and had returned to share the evening meal. She drew back well within the house when she realized her mistake. The stranger stood for one second as though in doubt, then his voice reached the waiting girl.

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"Prudence, isn't it?"

The girl started. Then a smile broke over her pretty dark face.

"Why it's Hervey, brother Hervey. Here, mother," she called back into the hall. "Quick here's Hervey. Why, you dear boy, I didn't expect you for at least a week, and then I wasn't sure you would come. You got my letter early then, and you must have started off almost at once. You're a real good brother to come so soon. Yes, is here, tea is just ready. Take off your coat. Come along, mother," she called out again joyously. "Hurry, come as fast as you can. Hervey is here." And she ran away towards the kitchen. Her mother's movements were far too slow to suit her.

The man removed his coat, and voices recalled him from the direction of the kitchen.

"Dearest one, let, child, you do rush one about so. Where is he? There, you've left the door open, and where is that horrid brute of a dog? Why, it looks like a timber wolf. Send him out."

Mrs. Mallory talked far more rapidly than she walked, or rather trotted, under the force of her daughter's bustling excitement. Hervey went out into the hall to meet her, standing framed in the doorway he saw his dog.

"Get out, you brute," he shouted and stepping quickly up to the animal he launched a cruel kick at it which caught it squarely on the chest. The beast turned instantly away without a sound, and Hervey closed the door.

The mother was the first to meet him. Her stout arms were outstretched, while her face beamed with pride, and her eyes were filled with tears of joy.

"My dear dear boy," she exclaimed, smiling happily. Hervey made no reciprocal movement. He merely bent his head down to her level and allowed her to kiss his cheek. She begged him heartily to her ample breast, an embrace from which he quickly released himself. Her words then poured forth in a swift incoherent flow. "And to think I believed that I should never see you again. And how you have grown and filled out. Just like your father. And where have you been all this time, and have you kept well? Look at the tan on his face, Prudence, and the beard too. Why, I should hardly



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have known you, boy. If I hadn't 's known who it was. Why, you must be inches taller than your father for sure—and he was a tall man. But you must tell me all about yourself when the folks are all gone to-night. We are having a party, you know. And isn't it nice?—you will be here for Prudence's wedding. —"

"Don't you think we'd better go into the parlour instead of standing out here?" the girl interrupted practically. Her mother's rambling remarks had shown no sign of cessation, and the tea was waiting. "Hervey must be tired and hungry."

"Well, I must confess I am utterly worn out," the man replied with a laugh. "Yes, mother, if tea is ready let's come along. We can talk during the meal."

They passed into the parlour. As they seated themselves at the table Sarah Gurrige joined them from her place beside the stove. Hervey had not noticed her presence when he first entered the room, and the good school ma'am quietly day-dreaming had barely awakened to the fact of his coming. Now she, too, joined in the enthusiasm of the moment.

"Ah, Hervey," she said, with that complacent air of proprietorship which our early preceptors invariably assume, "you haven't forgotten me, I know."

*\* Though the impact of life will oft shut out the past,  
The thoughts of our school-days remain to the last.*

"Glad to see you, Mrs. Gurrige. No, I haven't forgotten you," the man replied.

A slight pause followed. The women folk had so much to say that they hardly knew where to begin. That trifling hesitation might have been accounted for by this fact. Or it might have been that Hervey was less overjoyed at his home-coming than were his mother and sister.

Prudence was the first to speak.

"Funny that I should have set a place more than I intended at the tea table," she said, "and funnier still that when I found out what I'd done I didn't remove the plate and things. And now you turn up." She laughed joyously.

Sarah Gurrige looked over in the girl's direction and shook an admonitory forefinger at her.

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"Mr. Grey, my dear—you were thinking of Mr. Grey, in spite of your lover's tilt."

"Who did you say?" asked Hervey, with a quiet glance at Prudence.

"Leslie Grey," said his mother, before the old schoolmistress could reply. "Didn't our Prudence tell you when she wrote? He's the man she's going to marry. I must say he's not the man I should have set on for her, but she's got her own plugging to seed, and I'm not the one to say her 'nay' when she chooses her man."

Hervey bowed himself with his food, nor did he look up when he spoke.

"That was Grey, I s'pose, I saw riding away as I came up? Good, square set chunk of a man."

"Yes, he left just before you came," said Prudence. "But never mind about him, brother. Tell me about yourself. Have you made a fortune?"

"For sure, he must," said their mother, gazing with round, proud eyes upon her boy, "for how else came he to travel from California to here just to set his eyes on us and see a slip of a girl take to herself a husband? My, but it's a great journey for a boy to take."

"Nothing to what I've done in my time," replied Hervey. "Besides, mother, I've got further to go yet. And as for sister Prudence's marriage, I'm afraid I can't stay for that."

"Not stay?" exclaimed his mother.

"Do you mean it?" asked his sister incredulously.

Sarah Curridge contented herself with looking her illmay.

"You see, it's like this," said Hervey. He had an uncomfortable habit of keeping his eyes fixed upon the table, only just permitting himself occasional swift upward glances over the other folk's heads. "When I got your letter, Prudence, I was just preparing to come up from Los Mares to go and see a big fruit grower at Aguara. The truth is that my fruit farm is a failure and I am trying to sell it."

"My poor boy!" exclaimed his mother; "and you never told me. But there, you were always as proud as proud and never would let me help you. Your poor father was just the same, when things went wrong he

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wouldn't own up to any one. I remember how we lost sixty acres of forty bushel, No. 1 wheat with an August frost. I never learned it till we'd taken in the next crop in the district at the next harvesting. But you didn't put all your savings into fruit?"

"I'm afraid I did, mother, worse luck."

"All you made up at the Yukon goldfields?" asked Prudence, alarm in her voice.

"Every cent."

There followed a dead silence.

"Then—" Mrs. Malling could get no further.

"I'm broke—dead broke. And I'm going East to sell my land to pay off my debts. I've had an offer for it, and I'm going to clinch the deal quick. Say, I just came along here to see you and I'm going on at once. I only got into Winnipeg yesterday. I rode out without delay, but struck the Arnsley trail, or I should have been here sooner. Now, see here, mother," Hervey went on, as a woe-begone expression closely verging on tears came into the old dame's eyes, "it's no use crying over this business. What's done is done. I'm going to get clear of my farm first and maybe afterwards I'll come here again and we'll talk things over a bit."

Prudence sat staring at her brother, but Hervey avoided her gaze. Mrs. Malling was too heartbroken to speak yet. Her weather-tanned face had blanched as much as it was possible for it to do. Her boy had gone out upon the world to seek his fortune, and he had succeeded in establishing himself, he had written and told her. He had found gold in quantities in the Yukon valley, and now now at last he had failed. The shock had for the moment crushed her, her boy, her proud independent boy as she had been wont to consider him, had failed. She did not ask herself, or him, the reason of his failure. Such failure, she felt, must be through no fault of his, but the result of adverse circumstances.

She never thought of the gambling-table. She never thought of reckless living. Such things could not enter her simple mind and be in any way associated with her boy. Hephzibah Malling loved her son, to her he was the king who could do no wrong. She continued to gaze blankly in the man's direction.

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Sarah Curridge alone of the trio allowed herself side-long, speculative glances at the man's face. She had seen the furtive overhead glances, the steady avoidance of the loving observation of her womankind. She had known Hervey as well, and perhaps just a shade better than his mother and sister had, and long since, in his childish school days, she had detected a lurking weakness in an otherwise good character. She wondered now if he had lived to outgrow that juvenile trait, or had it grown with him, gaining strength as the greater passions of manhood developed.

After the first shock of Hervey's announcement had passed, Mrs. Haling sought refuge in the consolation of her own ability to help her son. He must never know want, or suffer the least privation. She could and would give him everything he needed. Besides, after all, she argued with womanly feeling, now perhaps she could persuade him to look after the farm for her, to stay by her side. He should be in no way dependent. She would install him as manager at a comfortable salary. The idea pleased her beyond measure, and it was with difficulty she could keep herself from at once putting her proposal into words. However, by a great effort, she checked her enthusiasm.

"Then when do you think of going East?" she asked, with some trepidation. "You won't go at once, sure?"

"Yes, I must go at once," Hervey replied promptly. "That is, to-morrow morning."

"Then you will stay to-night," said Prudence.

"Yes, but only to get a good long sleep and rest my horse. I'm thoroughly worn out. I've been in saddle since early this morning."

"Have you sent your horse round to the barn?" asked Sarah Curridge.

"Well, no. He's hitched to the fence." The observing Sarah had been sure of it.

Prudence rose from her seat and called out to the hired girl—

"Mary, send out and tell Andy to take the horse round to the barn. He's hitched to the fence." Then she came back. "You'll join our party to-night, of course."

"Hoity, girl, of course not," said their mother. "How's

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he had gone to get rest gallivanting with a lot of clown who can only talk of 'flowers' and 'jokers'! You think of nothing but 'how-de-do's' with your neighbor, now you're going to be married. Things were different in my day. I'll look after Harvey," she continued turning to her son. "You shall have a good night, lad, no my name's not Hephzibah Manning. May be you'll tell me by and by what you'd like to do."

"That's right, mother," replied Harvey, with an air of indifference. "You understand what it is for a man to need rest. I'll just hang around till the folks come and have the stuff to bed. You don't mind, Prue, do you? I'm beat but I want to leave at daybreak."

"Mind?" answered Prudence. "cert—s—t! I run. I thought I've asked you to meet Mr. Grey, but you must get your rest."

"S—t!" added her mother, "and as for me to let Mr. Grey see your brother won't sicken for want of seeing him. I'll wait. Come along Harvey, we'll go to the kitchen. Prudence has to get her best parlour ready for those chattering n—s. And, miss," turning to her son, "with an expression of pretended severity, "don't forget that I've got a batch o' lover cakes in the oven, so let's see what you want in the way of d—ks. La, young folks never think of the comforts. I expect I don't know what you'll do without your n—ber, met. Some o' these times your carelessness will get your partner made a laughing-stock of. Come along Harvey."

The old lady bustled out, leaving her son off in triumph to the kitchen. She was quite happy again now. Her scheme for her son's welfare had shut out all thought of his badness. Most women are like this. The joy of giving to the poor is perhaps the greatest joy in the life of a mother.

In the hall they met the flying, agitated figure of the loved girl, Mary.

"Oh, please! in there's such a racket going on by the barn. There's Andy on the two dogs fighting with a great strange three-legged dog and looks like a wolf. There's that mouse I up that I don't know. I'm sure."

"It's that brute Neebe of mine," said Harvey, with an unrepentance. "It's all right, girl, I'll go."

Harvey rushed out to the barn. The great three-legged

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savage was in the midst of a fierce scuffle with two farm dogs were attacking him. They were both half-bred sheep-dogs. One was making futile attempts to get a hold upon the stranger and Neche was shaking the other as a terrier would shake a rat. And Andy the choreman was lambasting the intruder with the business end of a two-prong hay fork, and shouting frightful curses at him in a strong American accent.

As Hervey came upon the scene, Neche hurled his victim from him, either dead or dying, for the dog lay quite still where it fell upon the snow. Then, responsive to the onslaught of the choreman, he seized the other dog.

"Come out of it, Andy," cried Hervey.

The hired man ceased his efforts at once, glad to be done with the savage. Hervey then ran up to the prostrate husky and dealt him two or three fearful blows.

The dog turned round instantly. His lungs were dripping with blood and he snarled fiercely, his baleful eyes glowing with ferocity. But he shook off when he recognized his assailant, and the second dog to run for its life, howling with canine fear.

Andy went over to the dog that was stretched upon the snow.

"Guess he's done, boss," he said, looking up at Hervey as the latter came over to his side. "Say, that's about the slickest scrupper round these parts. Gee whizz, he went fur me like the tail end o' a cyclone when I took your plug to the barn. It was they eyes that kind o' distracted his attention. Mebbe that's mo' a wolf nor dog on him. Mebbe, I sez."

"Yes, he's a devil-tempered husky," said Hervey. "I'll have to shoot him one of these days."

"We'al, I do 'bows that it's a mercy he ain't got no more'n three shanks. Mackinaw! but he's handy."

The four women had watched the scene from the kitchen door. Hervey came over to where they were standing.

"I'm sorry, mother," he said. "Neche has killed one of your dogs. He's a fiend for fighting. I've a good mind to shoot him now."

"No, don't go for to do that," said his mother. "We oughtn't to have sent Andy to take your horse. I expect the beast thought he was doing right."

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He's a brute. Curse him!"

Peace answered nothing. Now she moved a little away from the house and talked to the dog. He was placidly stretched out with no show of patience, lying down and licking his forepaw on one of his front legs. He occasionally shook his great head, and stained the snow with the white which creeps from his fierce-looking ears. He ceased his operation at the sound of the girl's voice and looked up. His tone was gentle and caressing. Hervey suddenly called to her.

"Don't go near him. He's as treacherous as a dog in Spain."

"Come back," called out her mother.

The girl paid no attention. She called again, and with her blue apron encouragingly. The animal rose slowly to his feet. He looked down at her in her direction, then without any display of enthusiasm, came slowly towards her. His limp added to his wicked aspect, but he came. He did not stop until his head was resting against her dress, and her hand was caressing his great back. The poor creature seemed to appreciate the girl's attitude, but made no attempt to move away. It is probable that this was the best caress the dog had ever known in his savage life.

Hervey looked on and scratched his beard thoughtfully, but he said nothing more. Mrs. Malling went back to the kitchen. Sarah Curridge alone had anything to say.

"Poor creature," she observed, in tones of deep pity. "I wonder how he lost his foot. Is he always fighting? A poor companion, I should say."

Hervey laughed unpleasantly.

"Oh, he's not so bad. He's savage, and all that. But he's a good friend."

"Ah, and a deadly enemy. I suppose he's very fond of you. He lets you kick him," she added significantly.

"I hardly know—and I must say I don't much care—what his feelings are towards me. Yes, he lets me kick him." Then, after a pause, "But I think he really hates me."

And Hervey turned abruptly and went back into the kitchen. He preferred the more pleasant atmosphere of his mother's adulation to the serious reflections of Sarah Curridge.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE PROGRESSIVE RICHIE PARTY

THE Millings always had a good gathering at their card parties. Such form of entertainment and dances were the chief winter amusement of these prairie-bred folk. A twenty mile drive in a coach, piled high with furs beneath heavy fur robes, and resting on a deep bedding of sweet-smelling hay in rows of seats, made the journey as comfortable to all passengers as would the luxurious brougham to the wealthy citizens of New York. There was little thought of icy air among the farmers of Manitoba. When they went to a party the primary object was enjoyment, and they generally contrived to obtain their desire at these gatherings. Jokes were freely taken in parties, and the amount of amusement obtained in the bottom of a boy's sleigh would be unknown to those without such experience. There was no sympathy about the simple country folk. A hard day's work was nothing to them. They would follow it up by an evening's enjoyment with the keenest appreciation, and they knew how to revel with the best.

The last to arrive at Len Dyke Farm were the Furrers—May, Fortune and Rachel, three girls of rounded proportions, all dressed alike and of age ranging in the region of twenty. They spoke well and frequently, and their laughing eyes and ready laugh indicated spirits at every pitch. These three were great friends of Florence, and were loud in their admiration of her. Peter Furrer, their brother, was with them, he was a red-faced boy of about seventeen, a giant of flesh, and a pigmy of intellect outside of farming operations. Mrs. Furrer was organized the party as chaperon, for even in the West chaperons are recognized as useful adjuncts, and besides, enjoyment is not always a question of age.



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Following closely on the heels of the Butters came the Ganthers, his two sons Tim and Harry. Ganthers was a well-to-do 'mixed' farmer, a widower who was kept busy for a portion of the year and retired at home the rest of the time. He was more than the other by reason of his education at St. John's University in Washington. There was no school till by Order, and already Tim was a member of the small neighborhood college at Lawrence. Tim acted as a formal teacher for a summer, and was of enterprising ideas, and when he hesitated a moment to let his young parent the advantage of devoting himself to stock-raising.

Harry arrived, a true successor, a truly agricultural young man, the eldest of the family, arriving as the Ganthers' mother son, and a brighter personality, with considerable means, and receiving support from the Old Country.

His half past seven everybody had arrived with the exception of George Iredale and Leola Grey. The fun began from the very first.

The dining table had disappeared from the parlor, and the rug from the floor, and a mellow layer of white was the aspect of a fall of snow lay invitingly on the polished pine boarding. And, too, it seemed only natural that the moment she came into the room ready for the fray, Daisy Butters should make a rush for the nearest glass and ruble out with fair execution the strands of an old water. Her efforts broke up any sign of continuity, everybody knew everybody else, so they danced. This was the beginning, and would come later.

They danced all three, and right well too. Daisy revelled in the stinging sprays of powder quickly blown with the excessive complacency of all times of merriment, and the tears of joy glowed with a healthy hue on her cheeks with perfect happiness. There could be no doubt that Tim and her mother knew their world as well as any could wish. And it was all so easy, so simple, so plain to observe, just free and easy good fellowship.

When the music of the kitchen she was a little heated with her exertions, and a stray drop of two of grey hair escaping from beneath her queue

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lace cap testified to her culinary exertions. She had been stooping at her ovens regardless of her appearance. She found her daughter standing before the door of the parlour engaged in a discussion of conversation with Peter Hutter. Providence hated her mother with a sort of rage, and the monumental face seemed to say, "Go away."

"Oh mother dear, it's the head of you, not the body," the girl, gazing at her critically. "And what's the use of the I took with your cap. Look at it. Now I've got my nose wide, and your hair is sticking out like the longest smooth grass. Stand still while I fix it."

The girl's delicate fingers soon arranged her mother's hair, and the old lady, testing all the while, but without any patience to the operation.

"There there, you children think of nothing but putting and putting and fussing. Look at me, and tell me I was going to sit down at tea with a very respectable lot of the church. Nobody's going to look at me, and what's the use of the fussing come on. It doesn't do it matter with neighbors? Look at that to show over their bowing and scraping to Mrs. Gant's. Our word that it was not his way to do anything else. He's less elaborate when he's trading after his piggy. My, but I can't shade such pretending. Guess some folks think women are hard. And where's George Irdale? I don't see him. Now there'd be some excuse for his doing the great. He's a gentleman born and bred."

"Ah, yes, mother, we all know your weakness for Mr. Irdale," replied Providence, with an affectionate snub, "put to the grey old horse." "But then, he just wouldn't bow and scrape," as you call it to Mrs. Gant, thorn or any way else. He's not the sort for that kind of thing. He hasn't come yet. I'm bringing him to you at once, dear, when he arrives," she finished up with a laugh.

"You're a saucy body," her mother returned, with a chuckle. "Then," "But I'd have taken to him as a son. Girls never learn anything from a day's life. They're married to the man they love."

"Nothing like your own little lady to be. I'll ask any one's advice when you married him."

"That I don't for sure, child, but it was different. Your father, Susan, wasn't the man to be put off with any

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notions. He just said he was going to marry me—and he ~~is~~ marry me. I was all sort o' awed off my feet.

"I told you choose him yourself," persisted the girl laughingly.

"Well, maybe I did, child, maybe I did."

"At I you didn't regret your own choice, mother; so why should I?"

"Ah, it was different with me—quite different. Ah, here's some one coming in." Hezekiah Malling turned as she spoke, glad to be able to change the subject. The next door was opened, and a fur-clad figure entered.

It's George Iredale, she went on, as the man removed his cap and display'd a crown of dark brown hair, large here and there with grey, a broad high forehead and a pair of serious eyes.

"Come along, George," Mrs. Malling bustled forward, followed by her daughter. "I thought you couldn't get, maybe. The folks are all dancing and dallying. You must come into the kitchen first and have something warm. It's a cold night."

"I meant to come earlier," replied the new arrival, in a deep, quiet voice. "Fortunately, just as I was going to start, word was brought in to me that a suspicious looking horseman was hovering round. You see my place is so situated that any intruder has to be inquired into. There are some horse thieves and other dangerous characters about, and I have to be careful. Well, I tried not to overdo, when the intruder was, but I forgot that he would be a water-carrier and I rendered him, alas, quite useless. Neither of you. Yes, something of a nuisance, but not a dangerous water-carrier."

George Iredale had divested himself of his coat and vest, and now faced his hostess to the kitchen. He was a man of middle age, middle height, middle build.

He was powerfully built, although his build suggested the fact to a large extent, and his head could baffle even him. He had a strong, open, pleasant face that was very large featured, and would not likely have been noteworthy, but for an expression of his eyes. They told in a word with a suggestion of amused tolerance. It was the face of a man in whom women like to place confidence, and with whom men never attempt to

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take liberties. He had, too, a charm of manner around him even living the rough life of the chase.

The ticking strains of the watch had ceased, and the dance went back to the parlour. She felt that it was high time to set the table for "game" and "cocker." It was past eight and they had not turned up. She began to think he intended carrying out his threat of staying away. Well, if he chose to do so, he could. She would not ask him to do otherwise. She sat unhappily alone at home in spite of her brave thoughts.

Her announcement of cards was taken with delight and the guests departed with a rustle, leaving the room for a sufficient number of small tables to cope with the requirements of the game.

In the kitchen George Fiddle was slowly wiping a steaming glass of eye-wash with his finger. He was waiting for a right high backed armchair to come away from the big cook stove at which Hephzibah Maling was presiding. Many bottles and saucers stood streaming with steam on the black iron top, and the occasional pop and hiss of it. If the events of the day were to be recalled the next day, Mrs. Maling would be a most wonderful creature. Mrs. Maling, however, did not interfere. Her husband's domestic duties were not a great burden to her.

"It is like his poor father in some ways," she was saying, as she lifted a batch of small cakes out of the oven and moved towards the table with them. "He never squealed about his misfortune to me. Not one letter, not I got asking for help. His pride is all right. And now I don't know, I'm sure."

She passed with her hand on the open door of the refrigerator and looked back at the parlour.

"Is there any more of that?" she called out. "What is the reason for it?" Fiddle was pouring his glass once more, and looking across at her.

"Not that he did not see that," in a tone of pride. "He just said he'd faced it. But he was 'faced.' He's been here long enough with the little game, but he's never right here—or you should hear it from his own lips. He never blamed no one."

"Ah, and you are going to help him, Mrs. Maling. What are you going to do?"

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"That's where I'm fixed come. Money he can have all he wants."

Iredale shook his head gravely.

"That's plain, Mrs. Manning, until you know all the facts."

"What's my own flesh and blood to me?"

"I know nothing better than to want him to get out of the place as he is, and the best friend I have of him and the biggest trouble that flesh and blood can be to me. I know enough that it is easier to throw good money after evil. I don't farming is a lottery in which he is sure to lose who take the most tickets. I don't want to see a good deal of money. A man may make money through the lottery, but he will lose it. The best way to have a better chance by reason of the extent of the loss. Now I should like it you could be better for me to be taking all the facts, setting them out and then to see what to do. My experience prompts me to suggest another business. What will it be?"

A group of excitement had left Mrs. Manning's face. She departed her face is a red and white to the olive standing before her guest with her hair turned down in her apron pockets and a delight of smile on her face.

"That's just what I thought of once," she said. "You're real smart, George, who run the farm? I have that to myself right. If I don't like it better, I know but there's drawbacks. Yes, drawbacks. It was not much for the potatoes, meaning his own loss. He's not one to pay several back up to speak. Now while I see the farm is mine, and I wanted my business to continue who could teach me, my son. Now I don't like Harvey my foreman and give him a good wage. It'd have all he wants, but he'd have to be my foreman." The old lady shook her head decisively.

"And you think Harvey wouldn't accept a substantial position?"

"He's that proud. Just like my poor son," murmured the mother.

"Then he's a fool. But you try him," Iredale said dryly.

"Do you think he might?"

"You never can tell."

"I wonder now if you, you, I'll ask him."

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"Offer it to him, you mean." George Iredale smiled quietly.

"Yes, offer it to him," the old lady corrected herself thoughtfully. "But I am forgetting my steaming oysters, and Mistress Prudence will get going on, for she had them sent up all the way from St. John's, if they're burned. She turned to one of the bottles and began stirring at once. "Henry is coming back after he's been to Niagara, and I'll talk to him to-morrow, I wish you could have seen him before he went, but he's alone."

"Never mind, there's time enough when he comes back. Ah, Prudence, how is the embroidery progressing?" Iredale turned as the girl came hurriedly in.

"Oh, here you are. You two gasping as usual. Mother, it's too bad of you to cut me off my guests. But I came to ask for more lemonade."

"Dip it out of yourself as a child. And you can take the game off at once. It's high time he got at the cards."

"He's too late, the game is nearly over. He'd have to sit out with Father. It was too late. Come along, Mr. Iredale, we shall need the lemonade pitcher."

"and mother will allow you be ready with the supper? Remember, you've got to come and give out the prizes to the winners before that."

"Aye to the losers," put in Iredale.

"Yes, they must all have prizes. What time, mother?"

"In an hour. And be off the par if you. Mary, Mary!" the old lady called out, moving towards the summer kitchen. "Hurry about, girl, and count down the prizes from the dresser. I'm looking at you, she went on, as the hired girl came running in, "where's the cap I gave you? And for good a mussy's sake go and scrub your hands. My, but girls be jades!"

Iredale and Prudence went off to the parkway. The game was nearly over, and the guests were laughing and chattering merrily. The excitement was intense. Leslie Grey sat aloof. He was engaged in a perfunctory conversation with Sarah Curridge, but to judge by the expression of his face his temper was still soured by his thoughts were far away. The moment Iredale entered the room Grey's face lit up with something like a terror.

Prudence, accompanying the rancher, was quick to

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observe the change. She had been prepared for something of the sort, with which the promise she had given to her sister-in-law was well foreseen. She had told herself as being willing to sacrifice for her husband, and the evening passed in further gratification. And all the pains had been worth it, as pain was sweet. A word or two, just such a request as those people would not mind supplying. The delicious Mrs. May offered her guests were so willing to be taken care of. She would not part, and even her mother, if she had any, who had said, admitting that her own work, with a bit of sewing amongst the paraffin was a tolerable means to the highest end.

After supper the guests were asked to make a speech in face of the married life, and the next day the guests were taken to a small work room which was usual set aside on these occasions for the use of those who desired to smoke. In the room, who had been talking, Mr. May, calling and who had been watching for this opportunity, quickly followed.

He found himself that Freda came to the farm to turn his attention upon Pauline. This was expected enough in itself, but when Freda, in his right mind, began to talk of it, matters pertaining to the owner of Lonsdale, his judgment was to be long put to rest. He meant to have it out with him tonight.

Freda had already adjusted himself to a comfortable chair covered with a chair when they arrived upon the scene. A great brass pipe hanging from the corner of his strong, decided neck, and he was smoking thoughtfully.

Grey moved briskly to another chair and flung himself into its depths with little regard for its age. Nor did he attempt to smoke. His mind was too active and disturbed for anything so calm and soothing.

His first words indicated the condition of his mind.

"Kicking up a racket in there," he said, jerkily, indicating the parlor. "Can't stand such a noise when I've got a lot to think about."

"No," Freda nodded his head and up he without removing the pipe from his mouth.

"We are to be married to-morrow week," Prudence said.

"So I've been told. I congratulate you."

Iredale looked at his companion with grave eyes. They were quite alone in the room. He had met Grey frequently and had learned to understand his ways and to know his bull-headed methods. Now he quietly waited. He had a shrewd suspicion that the man had something unpleasant to say. Unconsciously his teeth closed tighter upon his pipe.

Grey raised his eyebrows.

"Thanks. I hardly expected it."

"And why not?" Iredale was smiling. His grey eyes had a curious look in them—something between quizzical amusement and surprise.

"Oh, I don't know," the other retorted with a shrug. "There is no telling how some men will take these things."

Iredale removed his pipe and pressed the ash down with his little finger. The operation required the momentary lowering of his eyes from his companion's face.

"I don't think I understand you."

Grey laughed unpleasantly.

"There's not much need of comprehension. If two men run after the same girl and one succeeds where the other fails, the successful one doesn't usually expect congratulations from his unfortunate rival."

"Supposing such to be the case in point," Iredale replied quietly, but with an ominous lowering of his eyelids. "Mark you, I only say 'supposing.' I admit nothing to you. The less successful man may surely be honest enough, and man enough to wish his rival well. I have known such cases among men."

Grey twisted himself round in his chair and assumed a truculent attitude.

"Notwithstanding the fact that the rival in question never loses an opportunity of seeking out the particular girl, and continuing his attentions after she is engaged to the other? That may be the way among men. But not honest men."

The expression of Iredale's face remained quite calm. Only his eyes—keen, direct-gazing eyes—lit up with an angry sparkle. He drew a little more rapidly at his pipe, perhaps, but he spoke quietly still. He quite understood that Grey intended forcing a quarrel upon him.



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"I shall not pretend to misunderstand you, Grey. Your manner puts that out of the question. You are unwarrantably accusing me of a most unpardonable proceeding. Such an accusation being made by any one

"What shall I say?" more responsible than you. I should take considerable notice of, as it is, it is hardly worth my consideration. You are at best a blunderer. I should pause before I replied had I the misfortune to be you, and try to recollect where you are. If you wish to quarrel there is time and place for so doing."

Iredale's words stung Leslie Grey to the quick. His fiery temper fairly jumped within him. His eyes flashed with rage, and he could scarcely find words to express himself.

"You may say as much as you like," he answered bluntly, "but you cannot deny that you have lost to this house are paid with the object of addressing my all-merciful wife. You are right when you describe such conduct as impertinent only. You are no gentleman! But I do not suppose that the man who owns Lonely Ranch will for the sake of doing condescend to a quarrel or anything else."

"Stop!" Iredale was roused, at that. There was no mistaking the set of his square jaw and the command in his brow. "You have gone a step too far. You shall apologize or——"

"Stop! What? You may well demand that I should stop. Mr. George Iredale. Were I to go on, you would have a distinctly bad time of it. But my present consideration is not with the concerns of Lonely Ranch. I am only with your visits here, which shall cease from to-day out. And as for apologizing for anything I have said I'll see you damned first."

There was a moment's breathless pause. The two men confronted each other both red-faced, staring at each other a moment as to would have seemed impossible in at least one of them.

Grey's face worked convulsively with suppressed excitement, but he gripped himself together. There was calm under the "st of swift thought. He was the first to break the silence, and he did so in a voice well modulated and under perfect control. But the mouthpiece of his pipe was nearly bitten through.

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"Now I shall be glad if you will go on. You apparently have further charges to make against me. I have a hunch whether I am in the presence of a madman or a fool. One or the other, I am sure. You may as well make your charges at once. You will certainly answer for all you have already said, so make the list of your accusations complete before—"

You fool!" hissed Grey, gauged to the last extremity of patience. His headlong nature could not long endure restraint. Now his words came with a blind rush.

"Do you think I'd speak without being sure of my ground? Do you think, because other men who have occupied the position which is mine at Atinsley have been fools, that I am? Lonely Hatch, a fitting title for your place, with a secret. 'Lonely' in neighborhood yes, but not as regards its owner. You are wealthy, probably the wealthiest man in the province of Manitoba, why, that alone should have been sufficient to set the hounds of the law on your trail. I know the secret of Lonely Hatch. I have watched day after day the notice you have inserted in the *Free Press*. 'Yellow-brooming slump in Grey.' Nor have I rested until I discovered your secret. I shall make no charge here beyond what I have said, but—"

He awoke, broke off, awakening from his blind rage to the fact of what he was doing. His mouth shut like a trap, and beads of perspiration broke out upon his forehead. His eyes lowered before the ironical gaze of his companion. Thus he sat for a moment a prey to futile regrets. His anger had undone him. The sound of a short laugh fell upon his ears, and, as though drawn by a magnet, his eyes once more turned on the face of the rancher.

"I was not sure which it was," said Lonely dryly, "whether you were a fool or a madman. Now I know. I had hoped that it was madness. There is hope for a madman, but none for a fool. Thank you, Grey, for the comment you have supplied me with. Your folly has defeated your ruse. Remember this. You will never be able to use the 'Secret' as you are pleased to call it, of Lonely Hatch. I will take good care of that. And now, as I hear how it is of people running up-stairs,

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we will postpone further discussion. This interview has been prolonged sufficiently more than sufficient to you."

Iredale rose from his chair; to all appearance he was quite undisturbed. Grey's conclusion was exactly the reverse.

He, too, rose from his seat. There was a sound of some one approaching the door. Grey stepped up to his companion and put his mouth close to his ear.

"Don't forget that you cannot conceal the traces that are round your--ranch. Traces which are unmistakable to those who have an inkling of the truth."

"No, but I can take steps which will effectually nullify the exertions you have been put to. Remember you said I was wealthy. I am tired of your stupid long-winded talk."

Iredale turned away with a movement of disgust and irritation just as the door opened and Prudence came in.

"Ah, here you are, you two. I have been wondering where you were all this time. Do you know the people are going home?"

The girl ceased speaking abruptly and looked keenly at the two men before her. Iredale was smiling, Grey was gazing down at the stove, and apparently not listening to her.

Prudence saw that something was wrong, but she had no suspicion of the truth. She wondered, then she delivered a message she had brought and dismissed Iredale.

"Mother wants to see you, Mr. Iredale, something about Hervey."

"I will go to her at once. And the owner of Lonely Ranch passed out of the room."

The moment the door closed behind him the girl turned anxiously to her lover.

"What is it, Leslie dear? You are not angry with me still?"

The man laughed mirthlessly.

"Angry? No, child. I wonder if I—no, better not. It's time to be off. Give me a kiss, and I'll say good night."

## CHAPTER VII

### LESLIE GREY FULFILLS HIS DESTINY

It was early morning. Early even for the staff of the Rodney House Hotel. And Leslie Grey was about to breakfast. The solitary waitress the hotel boasted was laying the tables for the eight-o'clock meal. The room had not yet assumed the spick and span appearance which it would wear later on. There was a suggestion of last night's supper about the atmosphere; and the girl, too, who moved swiftly here and there arranging the tables, was still clad in her early morning, flowery print dress, and her hair showed signs of having been hastily adjusted with the aid of a looking-glass. A sight of her suggested an abrupt rising at the latest possible moment.

From the kitchen beyond a savoury odour of steak and coffee penetrated the green-lattice swinging-door which stood at one end of the room.

"Is that steak nearly ready?" asked Grey irritably, as the girl flicked some crumbs from the opposite end of his table on to the floor, with that deft flourish of a dirty napkin which waitresses usually obtain.

She paused in her work, and her hand went up consciously to the screws of paper which adorned her front hair.

"Yes sir, it'll be along right now."

Then she continued to flick the table in other directions.

"I ordered breakfast for six o'clock. This is the thickest place I ever knew. I shall talk to Morton and see if things can't be altered. Just go and rouse that cook up. I've got to make Leedsville before two."

The girl gave a final angry flick at an imaginary crumb and flounced off in the direction of the kitchen. The next moment her shrill voice was heard addressing the cook.

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"Mr. Grey wants his breakfast—sharp, Molly. Dish it up. If it ain't done it's his look-out. There's no pleasing some folks. I s'pose Mr. Chillingwood 'll be along pretty. Better put something on for him or there'll be a row. What's that steak? That won't do good for Mr. Robb. He wants pork chops. He never eats anything else for breakfast. Says he's used to pork."

The girl returned to the breakfast room bearing Grey's steak and some potatoes. Coffee followed quickly, and the officer attacked his victuals hungrily. Then Robt. Chillingwood appeared.

Leslie Grey was about to rebuke the girl for her remarks to the cook, but Robb interrupted him.

"Well, how does the bridegroom feel?" he asked cheerily.

"Shut up!"

"What's the matter? Cranky on your wedding morning?" pursued the town clerk irrepressibly.

"I wish to goodness you'd keep your mouth shut. Why don't you go and proclaim my affairs from the steps of your beastly Town Hall?" Grey glanced meaningly in the direction of the window standing in open-mouthed astonishment beside one of the tables.

Robb laughed and his eyes twinkled mischievously. He turned sharply on the girl.

"Why, didn't you know that Mr. Grey was going to be married to-day?" he asked, with assumed solemnity.

"Well, I'm blessed," as the girl shook her head and giggled. "You neglect your duty, Nellie, my girl. What are you here for but to 'slag haah' and learn all the gossip and scandal concerning the boarders? Yes, Mr. Grey is going to get married to-day, and I—I am to be his best man. Now be off, and fetch my 'mutton'—which is pork."

The girl ran off to do as she was bid, and also to convey the news to her friends in the kitchen. Robb sat down beside his companion and chuckled softly as he gazed at Grey's ill-humoured face, and listened to the shrieks of laughter which were borne on the atmosphere of cooking from behind the baffle door.

Grey choked down his indignation. For once he understood that protest would not serve him. Everything

about his marriage had been kept quiet in Ainsley up till now, not because there was any need for it, but because he had acceded to his expressed wishes. The latter, however, felt himself in no way bound to keep a silence on this, the eventful day. Robb attacked some toast as a peel me fry, while the other dined on his steak. Then Grey looked up from his plate. His face had cleared, his ill-humour had been removed by a look of keen earnestness.

"It's a beastly nuisance that this is my wedding day," he began. "Yes, I mean it," as Robb looked up in horror and astonishment. "I don't mean anything derogatory to myself. I just state an obvious fact. You would understand if you knew all."

"But, damn it, man, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for saying such a thing. You are marrying one of the best and sweetest girls in Southern Manitoba, and yet—why, it's enough to choke a man off his feed." Chillingwood was angry.

"Don't be a fool. You haven't many brains, I know, but use the few you possess now, and listen to me. A week ago, yes, a week hence, yes. But for the next three days I have some dangerous work on hand that must be done. Work of my department."

"Ah, dirty work, I suppose, or there'd be no 'must' or 'danger' about it."

Grey shrugged.

"Call it what you like. Since you've left the service I notice you look at things differently," he said. "Anyway, it's good enough for me to be determined to see it through in spite of my wedding. Damn it, there's always some obstacle or other cropping up at important moments in my life. However, I wish I knew whether I could still trust you to do something for me. It would simplify matters considerably."

Robb looked serious. He might not be possessed of many brains, as Grey had suggested, although Grey's opinions were generally warranted. But he thought will before he replied. And when he spoke he showed considerable decision and foresight.

"You can trust me all right enough if the matter is clean and honest. I'll do nothing dirty for you or anybody else. I've seen too much."

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"Oh, it's clean enough. I don't dirty my hands with the worst dealings. I simply do my duty."

"But your sense of duty is an exaggerated one, isn't it? I notice that it takes the form of any practices which you consider will advance your personal interests."

"It so happens that my 'personal interests' are synonymous with the interests of those I serve. Not all this is in the delivery of a letter in Winnipeg, at a certain time on a given date. I can't trust the post for a very particular reason, and I can't use the telegraph, that wouldn't answer my purpose. I could employ a messenger, but that would not do, for a disinterested messenger could be got at. You, I know, couldn't be so influenced. If you fail me, then I must do it myself, which means that I must leave my bride alone after the ceremony to-day, and I must get it to her on Friday, more than two days hence. That is how the matter stands. I will pay all the expenses and give you a substantial present to boot. Just for delivering a letter to the chief of police in Winnipeg. I will go and write it at once if you consent."

Robb shook his head doubtfully.

"I must know more than that. First, I must know, in confidence of course, the object of that letter. And, secondly, who is to be the victim of your machinations. Without these particulars you can count me 'out.' I'll be no party to anything I might afterwards have cause to regret."

"That settles it then," replied Grey resentfully. "I can't reveal the name of my 'victim' as you so gracefully put it. You happen to know him. I believe and dare on a friendly footing with him." He finished up with a callous laugh.

Robb's eyes shone wickedly.

"By Jove, Grey, you've sunk pretty low in your efforts to regain your lost position. I always knew that you hadn't a particle of feeling in your whole body for any one but yourself, but I didn't think you'd treat me to a taste of your rotten ways. Were it not for the sake of Alice Ferguson's name, the girl you are going to marry, I wouldn't be your best man. You have become utterly impossible, and, after to-day's event, I wash my hands of you. Damn it, you're a skunk!"

Grey laughed loudly, but there was no mirth in his hilarity. It was a heartless, nervous laugh.

"Easy, Robb, don't get on your high horse," he said presently. Then he became silent and a sigh escaped him. "I had to make the suggestion," he went on after a while. "You are the only man I dared to trust. Confound it if you must have it, I'm sorry!" The apology came out with a jerk, it seemed to have been utterly wrong from him. "Try and forget it, Robb," he went on, more quietly, "we've known each other for so many years."

Robb was slightly mollified, but he was not likely to forget his companion's proposition. He changed the subject.

"Talking of Winnipeg, you know I was up there on business the other day. I had a bit of a shock while I was walking about the dépôt waiting for the train to start."

"Oh," Grey was not paying much attention, he was absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Yes," Robb went on. "You remember Mr. Zachary Smith?"

His companion looked up with a violent start.

"Well, I guess. What of him? I'm not likely to forget him easily. There is just one desire I have in life which dwarfs all others to insignificance, and that is to stand face to face with Mr. Zachary Smith. Grey finished up significantly.

"Ah! So I should suppose." Robb went on. "Those are my feelings to a nicety. But I didn't quite realize my desire, and, besides, I wasn't sure, anyhow. A man appeared just for one moment, at the booking-office door as I happened to pass it. He started at me, and I caught his eye. Then he beat a retreat before I had called his face to mind—you see, his appearance was quite changed. A moment later I remembered him, or thought I did, and gave chase. But I had lost him, couldn't discover a trace of him, and nearly lost the train into the bargain. Mind, I am not positive of the fellow's identity, but I'd gamble a few dollars on the matter, anyway."

"Lord! I'd have missed fifty trips rather than have lost sight of him. Just our luck," Grey exclaimed violently.



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"Well, if he's in the district, we'll come across him again. Perhaps you will have the next chance." Robb pushed his chair back.

"I hope so."

"It was his right enough," Robb went on meditatively, his cherry face puckered into an expression of perplexity. "He was well dressed, too, in the garb of an ordinary citizen—and looked quite clean and respectable. His face had faded out, but it was his eyes that fixed me. You remember those two great, deep-sunken, cow-eyes of his?" Robb broke off as he saw Grey start. "Why what's up?"

Grey shook himself, then he gazed straight before him. Nor did he heed his companion's question. A strongly-marked pucker appeared between his eyebrows, and a look of uncertainty was upon his face. Robb again urged him.

"You haven't seen him?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Grey.

"What do you mean?"

"I have just remembered something. I came across a stranger the other day. He was wrapped in furs, and I could only see his eyes. But those eyes were distinctly familiar—'cow'-eyes, I think you said. I was struck with their appearance at the time, but couldn't just realize where I had seen eyes like 'em before." Then he went on reflectively. "But no, it couldn't have been he. Ah——" He broke off and glanced in the direction of the window as the jangle of sleigh bells sounded outside. "Here's our cutter. Come on."

Robb rose from his seat and brushed the crumbs from off his trousers. There came the sound of voices from the other side of the door.

"Some of the boys," said Robb, with a meaning smile.

"It's early for 'em."

"I believe this is your doing," said Grey sulkily.

Robb nodded in the direction of the window.

"You've got a team. This is no 'one-horsed' affair."

The door opened suddenly and two men entered.

"Oh, here he is," said one, Charlie Trellis, the post-master, with a laugh. "Congratulations, Grey, my friend. Double harness, eh? Tame you down, my boy. Good thing, marriage—for taming a man."

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"You're not looking your best," said the other Jack Broad, the telegraph operator. "Why, man, you look as tho gh you were going to your own funeral. Back up! Come and have a 'C' line', brace you up for the ordeal."

"Go to the devil, both of you," said Grey ungraciously. "I don't swill eye-openers all day like you, Jack Broad. Got something else to do."

"So it seems. But cheer up, man," replied Broad unperturbably, "it's not as bad as having a tooth drawn."

"Nor half as unpleasant as a funeral," put in Trulls with a grin.

Grey turned to Robb.

"Come on," he said abruptly. "Let's get. I shall see things in a minute if I stay here."

"That 'ud be something new for you," called out Broad as the two men left the room.

The door closed on his remark and he turned to his companion.

"I'm sorry for the poor girl," he went on. "The most cantankerous pig I ever ran up against—is Grey."

"Yes," agreed the other. "I can't think how a decent fellow like Robb Chislingwood can chum up with him. He's a surly clown—only fit for such countries as the Yukon, where he comes from. He's not particularly clever either. Yes," turning to the waitress, "the usual. How would you like to be the bride?"

The girl shook her head.

"No, thanks. I like candy."

"Ah, not vinegar."

"Nor—nor—pigs."

Broad turned to the grey-headed postmaster with a loud guffaw.

"She seems to have sized Grey up pretty slick."

Outside in the hall the two men donned their furs and over-shoes. Fortunately for Grey's peace of mind there was no one else about. The bar-tender was sweeping the office out, but he did not pause in his work. Outside the front door the livery-stable man was holding the horses. Grey took his seat to drive, and wrapped the robes well about him. It was a bitterly cold morning. Robb was

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just about to elude him when a ginger-headed man clad in a pea-jacket came running from the direction of the Town Hall. He waved one arm vigorously, clutching in his hand a piece of paper. Robb saw him first.

"Something for me, as sure as a gun. Hold on, Grey," he said. "It's Sutton, the sheriff. I wonder what's up?"

The ginger-headed man came up breathlessly.

"I thought I was going to miss you, Clifflingwood. A message from the Mayor. 'Doc' Bailey says won't that the United States marshal has got that horse-thief, Le Mar, over the other side. You'd have to make out the papers for bringing him over. I've got to go and fetch him at once."

"But hang it, man, I can't do them now," exclaimed Robb.

"He's on leave of absence," put in Grey.

"Can't be helped. I'm sorry," said the sheriff. "It's business, you know. Besides, it won't take you more than an hour. I must get across to Verdon before noon or it'll be too late to get the papers 'backed' there. Come on, man, you can get another cutter and follow Grey up in an hour. You won't lose much time."

"Yes, and who's going to pay the charge?" said Robb, relinquishing his hold on the cutter's rail.

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll have to stay," he said conclusively.

"I suppose so. Grey, I'm sorry."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," replied Grey coldly. "It's not your fault. Well, good-bye. Don't bother to follow me up."

"Damn it!" ejaculated the good-hearted Robb, as the cutter moved away.

"Going to get married, ain't he?" said the sheriff shortly, as Grey departed.

"Yes." And the two men walked off in the direction of Clifflingwood's office.

And Grey drove off to his wedding alone. He was denied even the support of the only man who, out of sheer good-heartedness, would have accompanied him. The life of a man is more surely influenced by the peculiarities of his own disposition than anything else. When a man

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takes to himself a wife, it is at least a time for the well-wishes of his friends. This man set out alone. Yet one (good) speed went with him. And yet he was not disturbed by the lack of sympathy. He looked at life from an uncommon standpoint, not as a selfish seeker for the attainment of happiness by his own acts, but as one not by any means content with his kind. He was one of the few men who need no friendship from his fellows, preferring rather to be without it. Thus he considered he was free to follow his own methods of life. His aim was to gain a position in the way of life he had chosen. Could he not attain this solely by his own exertions, then he would do without it.

The crisp, morning air whistled his cheeks with the staccato of a whip-lash as he drove his team of cattle which led from the House to the cow-yard. It was necessary for him to cross the track at this point before he would find him if upon the private road to the Leonville school house, at which place the ceremony was to be performed. The "gush" of the horses' nostrils sounded refreshingly in his ears as the animals faithfully danced over the smooth icy trail. The sleigh bells jingled with a confused clatter and sounds in response to the call of the eager beasts. But Grey thought little of these things. He thought little of anything just now but his intended despatch of the owner of Leonville Ranch. All other matters were quite subsidiary to his one chief object.

Once out in the open, the horses settled down into their long distance stride. Here the trail was not so good as in the precincts of the village. The snow was deeper and softer. Now and then the horses' hoofs would break through the frozen crust and sink well above the fetlocks into the under-snow.

Now the thick bush, which surrounded the village, gave place to a sparse covering of scrub red bluffs, and the grey-white aspect of the country became apparent. The trail was well marked as far as the eye could reach, two great furrows ploughed by the passage of horses and the runners of the farmers' heavy "double bobs." Besides this, the colour was different. There was a strong suggestion of earthiness about the trail which was not to be

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observed upon the rolling snow fields of the surrounding prairie.

The air was still though keen, and the morning sun had already risen well above the mist of grey clouds which still hovered above the eastern horizon. There was a tinkling sound everywhere. It was the morning promise of a fair day, and even the dazzling frost on the snow would become blinding to eyes unused to the winter glare.

But Grey was no tenderfoot. Such things had no effect on him. His big, cold eyes faced the glare of the daylight. It is only the inexperienced who gaze at the snow-baked earth, at such a time, with wide-open eyes.

The trail became a river as mile after mile was covered by the long, straight tracks of the hardy horses. Occasionally Grey would step off the trail into the deep snow to allow the heavy loads of the farmer to pass. A box sleigh would slide down with sacks of grain, toiling city ways to the snow-covered elevation. These inconveniences were the rule of the road, the lighter always giving way to the heavier conveyance.

Leslie was alone. A grey and the wide open sea of snow and cold the air surrounded him. Not a tree in sight, not a house or barn to lead the eye forward by. Just one little group of snow-plucking hens with the lapping red of their wattles. A hungry coyote and his mate growling in search of food at a distance of half a mile, looking larger by reason of their isolation. An occasional view of prairie chickens, miserably winging their way to a far distance. A flight well befitting both the hawk and the dove. A dark ribbon-like flight of ducks against the high, pale blue heavens, speeding from the south to be caught in the field where the water prairie she-birds were waiting to obstruct the flight of every thing that came near. If it were not for this to every one except the trail leader, the gait of his team and his scheme for advancement.

The winter night did not come, and the time passed rapidly by the traveler. And as the record of a long road, the face of the snow would earth be on again to change its appearance. The undulations of the prairie assumed

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water proportions. The waves rose to the point of foam and the gentle billows sank to the level of the sea, and the gulfing ripples. They all were free and clung of endless fish dotted the sea. A low, flat, with here and there largely in the rear a long line of stretching in perpendicular direction a single house stood, the harking of dogs life. These were of but a faintly recalled, and became now more faint and now again more rare. The time increased in speed and the bush thinned. Soon saw the traveller in on a 'down' country intersected by irregular streams and snow laden bushes. The timber became more heavy, great pine trees dominating the more stunted growth and dominating the outlook by reason of their more generous vegetation. On the eastern slopes of the forested country stood the white house of Lewisville. Beyond that the undulating prairie again up to Lewisville farm.

Lewisville looked at his watch. The hands showed a time approach to the hour of noon. He had yet three miles to go to reach his destination. He had crossed a small creek. A culvert bridged it, but the snow upon either side of the trail was so deep that the location of the indication of the roadwork was visible. It was such a place as these that a careful eye was needed. The snow and vergence from the forest track was less perceptible than the beam and culvert along which he would have been impossible to estimate. He went a smooth up. Three miles more that he would have to climb the upper part of the trail. He had done well, he had covered the distance in a short time.

The hill was a mass of red soil and rocks. It was as though the gradual denuding of the hill of woods country had culminated upon the peak. The plain of the forest was profound. The snow cover of the pine covered back by contrast with the snow and gazing in amongst the softest snow banks was only a greenish a word of the snow. The snow was

with eyes pressed and with eyes a word of the snow. The darkness of the path, the green of the snow, revealed something of its mysterious and to the traveller's nerves. Tired, he might be that he was ready to shy at each rustle of the heavy branches, as some stray

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breath, and bent them lazily and forced from them a weakling protest.

As the track continued toward the summit the trail narrowed again until a hand might touch it from the conveyance almost have brushed the tree-trunks.

Leslie never was upon his horses and his thoughts were everywhere. Above all, he spelled the opening in the trees at the crest of the hill was the hill against the sky-line. He remembered a certain sunset on his way to Loon Lake and turned and knew exactly what he felt. It had no beauties for him. These polished words conveyed nothing to his impression, he needed not even digger, for fear was not for him to be afraid. This feeling of security was more the result of his own lofty opinion of himself and the discipline which he held as law-breakers, rather than a high moral tone he possessed. Whatever his fate was a moral which found no place in his moral life. A man's moral life is a man might have a great world of it, but the man with which he found himself sure that his path. But Leslie Grey was differently situated.

Now as he neared the summit of the hill, he leant slightly forward and gathered up the reins which he had tied to his slings upon his horses' backs. A resounding clatter and the weary beasts strained at their necks.

He was looking among the trees attracted their attention. The sound of the reins were suddenly thrown up in startled attention. The off-side horse jumped sideways against its companion, and the sleigh was within an ace of falling the trees. By a great effort Grey pulled the sleigh back to the trail and his whip fell heavily across their backs. Then he looked up to discover the cause of the fright. A dark figure, a man clad in a black aboriginal coat, stood like a statue between two trees.

His right arm was raised and his hand gripped a levelled staff. But the confusion that Grey surveyed the apparition of the man was not in his position. Then a sharp sound came out of the gloom, and his hands were put to his chest and his eyes closed.

The next moment the eyes opened almost unseeing opened again, he swayed forward as though in great pain.

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then with an effort he flung himself backwards, settling himself against the unyielding corner of the seat. His face looked drawn and grey, nor did he attempt to relax the reins which had dropped from his hands. The horses unrestrained, broke into a bounding gallop, forcing him on and they raced down the track keeping to the beaten track with their wonderful instinct even although mad with fear. A moment later and the lighted sleigh appeared over the brow of the hill.

All became silent again, except for the confused standing jangle of the sleigh-bells on the horses' traces. The coast-guard figure moved out on to the trail, and stood gazing after the sleigh. For a full minute he stood thus. Then he turned again and swiftly became lost in the blackness of his whence he had so mysteriously appeared.



## CHAPTER VIII

### GREY'S LAST WORDS

FROM THE way it stands the Leonette seems to have been built and finished by the sky upon the sun as on a high mountain peak. It stands quite alone as though in proud disaffection for its classic vocation. Its flat, uninteresting facade, its staring windows, its high pitched roof of weathered shingles, its weather-boarding, its want of paint, its want of order or of perfect, these things make one forcibly feel that regard of Nature's carefully finished handiwork.

It was for its queerness, in fact, that for the moment rendered less apparent than usual by reason of many people gathered about the farm porch and the number and variety of farm vehicles, a group about the two turnposts which stood by the road side in front of it. An acre or so level of smooth prairie footed one side of the hill, whilst at the back of the house stretched miles of broken, hilly woodland.

The wedding party had arrived from Leon Dyke Farm. Elizabeth May had gathered her friends together, and all had driven over for the happy occasion, and the wildest enthusiasm and excited anticipation. Each girl, clad in her brightest colours beneath a sober outer covering of fur, was accompanied by her attendant swain, the latter well shod about the hair and well bronzed about the face, and glowing as an after-effect of the liberal use of soap and water. A wedding was no common occurrence, and, in consequence, demanded special mark of appreciation. No work would be done that day by any of those who attended the function.

Not the faintest suspicion of the mother had died out at the first breath of news. Talk talk, as regarded by the non-appearance of the bridegroom. The hour of the ceremony

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was close at hand and still he had not arrived. He could have been the last upon the scene. The others were awaiting the young girl's happy and festive wedding. He waited grown the most impatient. He gazed at the poor nervous. He had driven over for the last time at much inconvenience to himself to officiate at the launching of his old friend's daughter into the life of wedded life.

The older ladies had rallied to Mrs. Mallory's aid. The younger people held aloof. There was no music playing and the air was whispering and even more than usually upon the grey trail which stretched winding on towards the western horizon.

The Rev. Charles Danvers, the Methodist minister of Lakeview, was the central figure of the situation and whom the older ladies find their common cause in long gesturing. There could be no doubt from the nature and tone of these remarks that a party was approaching.

"It's quite too bad you know," said Mrs. Ganthorn, a iron grey haired lady of decided presence and a hooked nose. "I can't understand it in a man. I always business like ways. Now here, at the north town where I should have expected would have been here at least an hour before it was necessary."

"It is just his sort that fall on these occasions," put in Mrs. Ganthorn peevishly. "He's just too full of business for my fancy. What is the time now, Mr. Danvers?"

"On the stroke of the half hour," replied the parson with a gloomy look. "My eye ought to be very good. I can't see anything on the trail, or is that black object a bush?"

"Bush," said some one shortly.

"Ah," ejaculated the parson. Then he turned to Mrs. Mallory who stood beside him staring down the trail with unliking eyes. Her lips were pursed and twisting nervously. "There can have been no mistake about the time, I suppose?"

"Mistake? No," retorted the good lady with irritation. "Folks don't make no mistake at the hour of their wedding. Not the bridegroom, anyway. No. It's an accident that's what it is, as sure as my name is Elsie Elsie Mallory. And that's what comes of his staying at

to let when he ought to have been hereabouts. To see a man driving forty odd miles to get married. I ask you! It just makes me mad with him. There's no getting round it. I'll carry her eyes out on her wedding day, and she'll say so to her mother. It's a shame, and I'm not the one to be likely to forget to tell him so when he comes along. If he were my man he'd better his ways, I know."

No one replied to the old lady's heated complaint. They all tacitly agreed with her to defend the local tenant brought on. Mr. Dunsen drew out his watch for at least the twentieth time.

"Five minutes more," he murmured. Then aloud to a group passing. "We must allow him some margin. It's no use saying it's certainly was a mistake his remaining at Amsay."

Mr. Dunsen was indeed. Mrs. Malling retorted with all the worth she was capable of. "He's that fool-headed that he won't listen to no reason. Why couldn't he have stopped at the farm? Poppystruck-fol'atics!" Her face was flushed and her brow ominously puckered. She thrust her fist hard with no uncertain grip across the seat for tal-hiss which answered her question for a while. Her voice was chiefly heard upon alarm, and that alarm was not alone for her daughter. She was anxious for the man himself, and her anxiety found vent in that pre-war angry protest which is so little meant by those who resort to it. The great James was so pines and needles of nervous suspense. Had Grey suddenly appeared upon the scene doubtless her kindly face would have at once wreathed itself into a broad expanse of smiles. But the moments flew by and still the little group waited for the coming which was so long delayed.

Three of the young men approached the agitated mother from the juvenile gathering. Their faces were solemn. Their own optimism had given way before the protracted delay. Tim, Trillick and Peter Barron came first, Andy, the choroman, brought up the rear.

"We've been this long," said Tim, feeling it necessary to explain the process which had brought them to a certain conclusion, "that maybe we might just drive down the road to see if we can see anything of him, Mrs. Malling.

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"Ye can't just say how things have gone with him. May be he's struck a 'dum' - as his mother might say - but there's some thing a-duffa to come through, and it's dew easy to get dumped in 'em." Peter and Andy here have volunteered to go with me."

"That's real better of you, Tim," rejoined Mrs. Mallory with an air of relief. She felt quite convinced that an accident had happened. She told the minister. In this matter she considered he was the best judge. "Ask many of her neighbours she looked to the minister as the best worldly as well as spiritual adviser of her flock. "Lik as not the boys will be able to help him?" she suggested in a tone of inquiry.

"I don't think I should let them go yet," the minister then said. "Let me give him an hour. It seems to me it will be time enough then. Ah, here's Mrs. Gurnidge," as that lady appeared in the doorway. "There's no sign of him," he called out in anticipation of her inquiry. "I hope you are not letting the bride worry too much."

"It's too dreadful," said Mrs. Gurnidge, as her thoughts reverted to Prudence waiting in the school-ma'am's sitting-room.

"Whatever can have happened to him?"

"That's what's been troubling us this morn' and more," snapped the girl's mother. She was in no humor to be asked silly questions, however little they were intended to be answered.

She turned to Sarah. In this trouble the peaceful Sarah would act as oil on troubled waters.

Sarah understood her look of inquiry.

"She's bearing up bravely, Hephzibah. She's not one of the crying sort. Too much of your Silas in her for that. I've done my best to console her."

She did not say that she had propounded several mottoes more or less suitable to the occasion which had been delivered with great unction to the disconsolate girl. Prudence had certainly benefited by the good words in company, but not in the way Sarah had hoped and believed. It was the girl's own sense of humour which had helped her.

Mrs. Mallory turned away abruptly. Her red face had

grown a shade paler, and her round, brown eyes were suspiciously wet. As if she gazed steadily down the trail on which all her hopes were set. The guests stood around in respectful silence. The party which had arrived a moment before had now become as solemn as though they had come to attend a funeral. The minister continued to glance at his watch from time to time. He had probably never in his life so frequently referred to that faithful companion of his preaching hours, Timblebar, and Peter Furrer saw Andy had moved off in the direction of the sleigh. The others followed Mrs. Mallings example and bent their eyes upon the vanishing point of the trail.

Suddenly an ejaculation escaped one of the bystanders. Something moving had just come into view. All eyes concentrated upon a black speck which was advancing rapidly in a direct ground-snow. Hope rose at a bound to a wild, eager delight. The object was a sleigh. And the speed at which it was coming down the trail told them that it was bearing the beautiful bridegroom who conscious of his fault, was endeavouring to make up the lost time. Mrs. Mallings round face shone again in her relief, and a rich content escaped her. Were was sent at once to the bride and all was enthusiasm again. Then followed a terrible shock. Peter Furrer more long-sighted than the rest, discerned it in a business fashion as his own.

"There ain't no one aboard of that sleigh," he called out. "Say, them jokers is just beatin' Gum, but they be comin' back half fer-leekabuns." Every one understood his expression, and faces that a moment before had been radiant with hope changed their expression with equal suddenness to doubt, then in a moment to apprehension.

"You don't say——" Mrs. Mallings gasped; it was all she could say.

"It co't——" The minister got no further, and he fingered his watch in force of habit.

"It's——" some one said and broke off. Then followed an excited muttering. "What's Peter going to do?"

The young giant had started off down the trail in the direction of the approaching sleigh. He lurched heavily over the snow, his ungainly body rolling to his gait, but

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he was covering ground in much the same way that a race hound has tonight. His stride carried him along at a great pace. The on-lookers wondered and exclaimed the while, gazing after the simultaneous between the two of the slender young man and the huge lurching figure of the boy.

Now the sleigh was near enough for them to note the truth of Peter's statement. The horses, unprovoked by any guiding hand, were tearing up at a desperate pace. The latter impeded a slow, lurching threatening movement, but it was lifted back from the trail as its sinners struck the backed necks of the horses, now it was a desperate leaping between two things and fighting itself on the fly, then again it would jerk forward with a dash to the heels of the air, then it would come with a new effect. The poor brutes stretched themselves with a desire to escape from their terror. One of the men at the wheel of flying snow, and Peter had halted beside the trail awaiting them.

It was now watch again the boy move outside the wheel track. Almost the moment the horses could be heard to move was gone. If the animals were not stayed in their mad career they must inevitably crash into the wheel house or circle with the sleighs at the trap posts. There was no chance of their leaving the bear trail for they were prairie horses.

Some of the men, as the realization of this fact dawned upon them, hurried away to remove their possessions to some more secure position, but most of them remained gaping at the runaway team.

Now they saw Peter crouch down, beating the snow under his feet to give himself a firm footing. Barely fifty yards separated him from the sleigh. He settled himself into an attitude as though about to spring. Nearest drew the sleigh. The boy's position was fraught with the greatest danger. The on-lookers held their breath. What did he contemplate? Peter had methods peculiar to himself, and those who looked wondered. Nearest, nearer came the horses. A moment more and the boy was lost in the cloud of snow which rose beneath the horses' speeding feet. A sigh broke from many of the ladies as they saw him disappear. Then, next, there came

an expression of relief as they saw his bulky figure struggling with its load to draw himself up over the high back of the chair. It was no easy task, but Peter's great strength saved him. They saw him catch his breath and slant up a bare cushion then, for a moment, he looked down as though in doubt.

At last he braced forward and, having hold of the rail of the overcast dash, he started heavily out on to the setting of the sun, his legs the flying end of one of the reins was waving airily behind him. He veered out further at a jump to the dash-board which swayed and bent under the momentary weight. He turned a sharp wheel and got the moving thing and started on to the road. He came within an arm's length of the road and, having no other way out, he was forced by darting into the shelter of one of the houses. With a struggle he recovered himself and regained the road. The rest was the work of a few moments.

Turning himself he brought his whole weight to the single rein. The horse started at once andaving the toppling into the deep snow. The frantic animal fell recovered then rose and staggered on then with a great jolt the weight rolled over. Peter shed fear of the work but with experience of such cases he clung tenaciously to the rein. He was dropped a few yards then, trembling and ready to start off again at a moment's notice, the jaded beasts stood.

There was a rush of air to Peter's assistance. The water followed. But the water never reached the slope. Something ried in the brown fur of the buffalo was lying beside the trail where the entire had overturned. Here they came to a stand and found themselves gazing down upon the inanimate form of Lester Grey.

It was a member of the younger lot of the party who reached the injured man first, the Purser girl and one of the blue boys. They passed promptly within a couple of yards of the fur clad object and stared forward gazing down at it with half dead eyes. The next minute they were the last aside by the parents. He came followed by Mrs. Mallory.

It is a moment he had thrown himself upon his knees and was looking into the good face of the post-sle man and almost unconsciously his hand pushed itself in through

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the fastenings of the fur coat. He withdrew it almost instantly, giving vent to a sharp exclamation. It was covered with blood.

"Stand back, please, everybody," he commanded.

He was obeyed implicitly. But his order came too late. They had seen the blood upon his hand.

Mrs. Lanthorn began to faint and was led away. Other girls looked as though they might fall also. Only Hepzibah Malling stood her ground. Her face was blanched, but her mouth was tightly closed. She uttered no sound. All her anger against the prostrate man had vanished, a world of pity was in her eyes as she silently looked on.

The parson summoned some of the men.

"Bear a hand, boys," he said in a business-like tone which deceived no one. "We'll better get this into the house." Then, seeing Mrs. Malling become faint, "Get Prudence away at once. She must not see."

The old farm wife hurried off and the others gently raised the body of the unconscious man and bore it towards the house.

It was not Leslie Grey attend his wedding.

The body was taken in by a back way to Sarah Curridge's bedroom and laid upon the bed. Tim Curridge was dispatched at once to Lakeville for the doctor. Then dismissing everybody but Harry Lathorn, Mr. Lathorn proceeded to remove the sick man's outer clothing.

The room was small, the one window infinitely so. A single sunbeam shone sickly in through the latter and lit up the well-scrubbed bare floor. There was nothing but the plainest of "fairs" in the apartment, but they had been set in position by the deft hand of a woman of taste. The bed on which the unconscious man had been placed was narrow and hard. Its coverlet was a patchwork affair of depressing hues.

Mr. Lathorn bent to his work with a full appreciation of the tragedy which had happened. His face was solemn, and expressive of the most tender solicitude for the injured man. In a whisper he dispatched his assistant for warm water and bandages, whilst he unfastened and removed the fur coat. Inside the clothing was saturated with still warm blood. The monster's lips tightened as



the truth of what had happened slowly forced itself upon his mind.

A glow told man he in his misgivings that he feared the thought of these things would come to him as a relief. It was in fact the breaking of the last link which warned him that the deed was near. That he felt a relief from his agony. At that moment there was a knock on the door and a woman came across the hall to the door and the door was at the opposite end of the hall.

The soft sound of the girl's face was drawn and deep lines of anxiety that he had broken up the smooth surface of her face. Her eyes seemed to be straining out of their sockets and the whites were reddened. She did not speak, but her look displayed an anguish unspeakable. Her eyes were turned upon the face of the prostrate man. She did not appear to see the minister. Her look suggested some mute question, which seemed to pass from her troubled eyes to the silent figure. Watch her. He was understood and that for the present it would be dangerous to break the dreadful mystery that held her. He stepped again and drew back the material and began to cut away the outer garments from her chest.

Swiftly as the minister's deft fingers moved about the man's body his thoughts traveled faster. He was not a man given to mortal weaknesses. The calling demanded too much of the natural side of human nature. He was there to aid his flock as steadily as well as spiritually, but at the moment he felt positively sick on the thought of a woman and life for the woman who stood like a statue on the other side of what he knew to be this man's life. He dared not look over at her again. He kept his head lower and concentrated his mind on the work before him.

The silence continued broken only by an occasional heavy gasp of breath from the girl. The deep long short breath that came from the man's chest and the woman under it was a sound of a very firm one. The exposed flesh was a pale white. It was a very white looking from a small wound at the top of his back up in the chest than where the heart was as faintly beating. One glance sufficed to tell the person that medicine would be useless. The wound was through the lungs.

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For a moment he hesitated. His better sense warned him to keep silence, but pity urged him to speak. Pity swayed him with the stronger hand.

"He is alive," he said. "And the next moment he regretted his words."

The terror of the girl's death experience relaxed instantly. It was as the lifting of a load which which had crushed her heart with its fiercest weight. She had been numb and paralyzed. Actual suffering had not been hers; she had experienced a succession of feelings which had revolved from the shock of that agonizing and far more dreadful than the most terrible suffering. It was a moment when she asked her senses, "What is it?" and the waiting for the answer had been to her in the extreme of a blank.

The minister's low voice and gentle words had supplied her with an answer. "He is alive!" It was like to her the springs of life within her and a glad flush swept over her straining nerves. Heaven once more seemed to open, and the light flowed through her brain in an unchecked torrent. It seemed to her as if the iron barrier had suddenly shot off the simple life which has always been hers, and had opened out for her a fresh existence in which she found herself alone with the shattered body of her lover. For one brief instant her lips quivered, and a faint in rushing of the breath told of the woman which, at the first moment of feeling, had leaped upward in her. It was before the maturity of emotion brought about the breakdown, a calm strength came to her aid and steadied her nerves and checked the tears which had so suddenly come into her eyes. Women are like this. At a crisis in sickness they rise superior to all emotion. When the crisis is past, whether for good or ill, it is different.

The water was brought, and the minister sat about tending the discoloured flesh while the doctor knelt in silence. She was very pale, and her eyes were painfully bright. While her gaze fell was the gentle movements of the minister, her thoughts were passing swiftly over the scenes of her life in which the minister had played his part. She remembered every look of the bowed head and every expression of his well-loved features. She called to mind his words of hope

and the careful laid plans for his advancement. Nor was there any taint of his best blood in her recognition of this. She loved him with all the passionate intensity of one who had only just attained to perfect womanhood. He had been to her something of a hero, by reason of his headstrong dominating ways, ways which more often attract the love of woman in the first flush of her youth than in her maturer, more experienced years.

The woman's blood cleared the film of the ghastly stain, and the small wound with its darkened rim lay revealed in all its horrid significance. The girl's eyes fastened themselves on it, and for some seconds she watched the blood as it welled up to the surface. The meaning of the punishment forced itself slowly upon her mind, and she realized that it was no accident which had laid her lower lip. Her eyes remained fixed towards the crimson flow, but their expression had changed, as had the set of her features. A hard, merciless look had replaced the one of tender pity—a look which indexed a feeling more strong than any other in the human organism. She was beginning to understand now that a crime had been committed, and a cruel, fatal hate for some person unknown possessed her.

She pointed at the wound, and her voice sounded only in the stillness of the room.

"Oh,!" she said. "They have murdered him."

"He has been killed." The girl looked up into the girl's face.

"That'll not do," Sarah L. Bridge and Pauline's mother said with a cold approach to the bedside. The latter, carrying a bundle of linen in her hand, and came to Mr. L. and so said, "Mr. L. is gone, never to be seen here again. But the lady is poor, her little girl."

The farm wife lifted the girl's head from the bed post and conveyed her living sympathy. Then she endeavoured to draw her away.

"Come, child, come with me. You can do no good here."

Pauline shook her off roughly. "No," she answered. "Her mother did not renew her attempt."

All watched while Danvers forced some of the spirit between Grey's tightly closed lips and then stood up to note the effect.

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He was actuated by a single thought. He knew that the man was doomed, but he hoped that somehow or other might be accomplished before the time came for his execution. There was something to be said for human life, and give the dying man a chance to say it. Providence seemed to control the minister's motive. For she vaguely nodded her approval as she saw the spirit administered.

All waited eagerly for the sign of life which the stimulating properties of the salt might reveal. The girl also had her thoughts to drift away to the long trail over which her lover had passed. She saw in fancy the crushing accidents falling from the crests of the wave-like bluff. She seemed to hear many shouts as the speeding horses tried to hear the dull sound of the fatal bullet as her man was hit. She pictured to herself the assassin, with careless indifference as the cutter passed out of view, mounting their horses and riding away. Her thoughts had turned to the very criminals she understood beneath the coat.

The sign of life which had been so anxiously awaited came at last. It was apparent in the flash of the man's eyes, in the faintest of smiles born between the colourless lips. Danvers bent again over the dying man and administered more of the spirit. It took almost instantaneous effect. The eyelids half opened and the mouth distinctly moved. The action was like that of one who is parched with thirst, freely rasped painfully, and a strange rattle came from his throat.

Danvers shook his head as he heard the sound. Providence whose eyes had never left the dying man's face spoke sharply. She voiced a common thought.

"Who did it, Leslie?"

The minister's silent approval. For a moment his eyes rested admiringly on the girl's eager face. His courage astonished him. Then as he read her expression aright his wonder lessened. The girl's tragedy by a single spar at the point of transition from the girl to the woman. He understood that she had crossed that bridge.

Green started to speak but only a word. In uttering an inarticulate sound. The minister frowned. The suspense was dreadful. The salt revealed that he was fast sinking, but in every heart was a hope that he would speak.

would say one word which might give some clue to what had happened.

The man started at the hint of the beauty. The dying man turned his eyes to her. The eyes opened wider. Prudence bent forward. Her whole soul was in the look she bestowed upon the poor drawn face, and in the tones of her voice.

"Leslie, I never speak to me. My poor, poor boy. Tell me, how did it happen? Who did it?"

The man gave no response. He seemed to be making one last great strain, dealing with the very belated weakness which was his. His head reeled, and a feeble cough escaped his lips. The girl put her arm under his head and slightly raised it, and the dying eyes looked into hers. She could no longer find words to utter. Great passionate sobs shook her frail frame, and wicked tears coursed down her cheeks as she fell upon the dying creature.

A white, gleaming breath came from between the dying man's parted lips, and eddied in a hoarse rattling in his throat. Then his body moved abruptly, and one arm lifted from the elbow upon the bed, half turned towards the girl, and words distinct, but halting, came from the working lips.

"He—he did it. *For I Press*. Yell—  
t——" The last word died away to a gurgle. A violent fit of coughing seized the dying man, then it ceased suddenly. His head weighed like lead upon the girl's supporting hand, and a thin trickle of blood bubbled from the corners of his mouth. Prudence withdrew her arm from beneath him and replaced the head upon the pillow. Her tears had ceased to flow now.

"He is dead," she said with studied calmness, as she straightened herself up from the bed.

She moved a step or two away. Then she paused uncertainly and gazed about her like one dazed. Her mother went towards her, but before she reached her side Prudence uttered a strange, wild cry and rushed from the room, tearing with it the faster tags of her silk dress as though to rid herself of the mocking reminder of that awful day.

## CHAPTER IX

### LONELY RANCH AT OWL HOOK

In spite of the recent tragic event, the routine of the daily life at Leam Dyke Farm was very little interfered with. Just for a few weeks following upon the death of Leslie Grey, the organization of Mrs. Mallory's household had been thrown out of gear.

The coming of the police and the general scouring of the country for the murderers of the Customs officer had entailed a "nine days' wonder" around the countryside, and had helped to disturb the wonted peace of the farm. But the search did not last long. Horse thieves do not wait long in a district, and the experience of the "riders of the plains" taught them that it would be useless to pursue where there was no clue to guide them. The search was abandoned after a while, and the dastardly murder remained an unsolved mystery.

The shock to Prudence's nervous system had been a terrible one, and a breakdown, closely bordering upon brain fever, had followed. The girl's condition had demanded the utmost care, and, in the matter, Sarah Gurnidge had proved herself a loyal friend. Dr. Parash, with conscientious soundness of judgment, had ordered her removal for a prolonged sojourn to city life in Toronto, a course which in spite of heartbroken appeal on the girl's part, her mother insisted upon carrying out with Spartan-like resolution.

"Broken hearts," she had said to Sarah, during a confidential chat upon the subject, "are only kept from mending by them as talks sympathy. There isn't nothin' like mixin' with folks what's got their own troubles to worst over. She'll get al. that for sure when she gets to one o' them cities. Cities is full of purgatory," she added profoundly. "I shall send her down to sister Emma, she's

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one of these bustling women that it never let the child rest a minute."

And Sarah had approved feelingly.

As the summer was safe and done, had eastward for an indefinite period before the spring opened. But Hephaestus had not yet to reason that her daughter had visible developed from a child who looked to her mother's guidance in all the more serious questions of life into a woman of strong feelings and opinions. This was casting off of the fetters of childhood had been the work of the few passionate moments at the bedside of her dying mother.

Providence had submitted to the sentence which her mother backed by the father's advice had passed, and she went away. But it was not long with the world she had just formed the last net which childhood was to be supplied. The period of her absence was a quiet one. It contained no tumult up to her eyes with water of tears. She could not see when she elected to do. It was in the pure air of the peace, no city could claim her for long. And so she returned to the farm against all opposition within two months of leaving it.

The spring brought another change to the farm, a change which was as welcome to the old farm wife as the opening of the spring itself. Harvey returned from Niagara, bringing with him the story of the failure of his mission. True to himself and the advice of Providence, his husband made her proposition to him soon with the result that with some show of distaste he accepted the situation and with his three-legged companion took up his abode at the farm.

And so the days gathered and the summer heat increased, the hay in the meadows ripened and filled the air with its refreshing odours, the black squares of ploughed land were quickly covered with the deepening carpet of green succulent grain, the wild muskrat bushes flowered, and the cherry cherries ripened in the laden branches, and the deep blue vault of the heavens smiled down upon the verdant world.

George Irwin again became a constant and welcome visitor at the farm, not in her leisure did Sarah Gertrude seek relaxation in any other direction.

The morning was well advanced. The air was still and very hot. There was a peaceful dreaminess about the

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larn buildings and yard which was only broken by the occasional wailing of the mourning swine routing amongst any stray garbage; their indifference even happened to light upon the pigsties. The pigsties were closed open and in the cool shade of the interior could be seen the outlines of dark, well rounded forms loaming between the heel posts of the stanch which lined the side walls. An occasional impatient stamp from the heels showed how told of the capacity for annoyance of the ubiquitous fly or aggravating mow, etc. about the steady grinding sound which pervaded the atmosphere within, and the occasional "grub" of distended nostrils testified to healthy appetites, and noses buried in mangers well filled with sweet-smelling "Timothy" hay.

The kitchen doorway was suddenly filled with the ample proportions of Mr. Antab Ma. She moved out into the open. She was carrying a large pail filled with potato-parings and other fragments of culinary remains. A large white sun-bonnet protected her grey head and shaded her now flaming face from the sun, and her dress, a neat study in grey, was enveloped in a blue apron.

She moved out to a position well clear of the buildings and began to call out in a tone of persuasive encouragement -

"Tig—tig—tig! Tig—tig—tig!"

She repeated her summons several times, then moved on slowly, continuing to call at intervals.

The swine gathered with a hungry rush at her heels, and their chorus of acclamation drowned her faint cry. Passing down the length of the barn she reached a cluster of thatched mud hovels. Here she opened the crash gate to admit her clamorous flock, and then deposited the contents of her pail in the trough provided for that purpose. The pigs fell to with characteristic avidity, complaining vociferously the while as only pigs will.

She stood for a few moments looking down at her noisy charges with calculating eyes. It was a fine muster of young porkers, and the old lady was estimating their bacon-yielding capacity.

Suddenly her reflections were interrupted by the sound of footsteps, and turning she saw Henry crossing the yard in the direction of the creamery. She saw him disappear



down the steps which led to the door, for the place was in the nature of a dignit. She sighed heavily and moved away from her partners, and slowly she made her way to the wash-house. The sight of this man had banished all her feelings of satisfaction. Her son was a constant trouble to her, a source of grave worry and anxiety. Her hopes of him had been nothing but ill-fused.

In the morning, Harvey had propped himself against the door-cant of the creamery and was talking to his sister within. The building like all dignit, was long and low, its roof was heavily thatched to protect the interior from the effects of the sun or rain. Its floor was made of planks along the two side counters which lined the way from one end to the other. Each counter was covered with a number of large milk pans from which the girl was carefully skimming the thick, white cream. She worked methodically, and the rich fat floated with a heavy plink into the small pail she carried, in a manner which testified to the quality of the cream.

She looked a little paler than usual. The healthy bloom had almost entirely disappeared from her cheeks, and dark shadows surrounded her brown eyes. But this was the only thing to be deplored of the tragedy which had come into her young life. The trim figure was unimpaired, and her beautiful black hair was as carefully adjusted as usual. Harvey watched his sister's movements as she passed from pan to pan.

"It is so waste me to ride over to that Hunt to-day," he said slowly. "We are going to have an afternoon's clock about it. He says the prize chicken round his place are as thick as soap suds. He's a lucky beggar. He seems to have the best of everything. I've insured our farm all over and there's not as much as a solitary grey owl to get a pot at. I hate the place."

Prudence ceased working and faced him. She scornfully looked him up and down. At that moment she looked very picturesque, with her black skirt tucked up from the bottom and pinned about her waist, displaying an expanse of light blue petticoat. Her blouse was a simple thing in spotless white cotton, with a black ribbon tied about her neck.

"I think you are very ungrateful, Harvey," she said quietly. "I've only been worse for a few more days and not

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a day has passed but what I've heard you grumble about something in connection with your home. If it isn't the dullness it's the work, if it isn't the work it's your position of dependence, or the distance from town, or the people around us. Now you grumble because of the shooting. What do you want? We've got a section and a half, nearly a thousand acres under wheat. We've got everything that money can buy in the way of improvements in machinery, we've got a home that might fill many a town bred man with envy, and a mother who dines us both up, and yet you aren't satisfied. What do you want? If things aren't what you like, for goodness' sake go back to the wilds again, where according to your own account you were happy. Your incessant grumbling makes me sick."

"A new departure, sister, eh?" Hervey retorted smiling unpleasantly. "I always thought it was every body's privilege to grumble a bit. Still I don't think it's for you to start lecturing me if even it isn't. Mother's talked me pretty well in a way. But don't forget she's only hired me the same as she's hired Andy or any of the rest of the hands. Why I haven't even the same position as you have. I am paid so many dollars a month, for which I have to do certain work. Let me tell you this, my girl, if I had stayed on this farm until father died my position would have been very different. It would all have been mine now."

"Well, were you didn't do so, the farm is mother's," Prudence's pale cheeks had become flushed with anger. "And I think all things considered, she has treated you particularly well."

And she turned back to her work.

The girl was very angry, and justifiably so. Hervey was lazy. The work which was his was rarely done unless it happened to fall in with his plans for the moment. He was thoroughly bearish to both his mother and herself, and he had already overdrawn the allowance the former had made him. All this had become very evident to the girl since her return to the farm and it cut her to the quick that the peace of her home should have been so rudely broken. Even Prudence's personal troubles were quite secondary to the steady grind of Hervey's idleness.

Curiously enough, after the first passing of the shock

of Grey's death she found herself less stricken than she would have deemed it possible. There could be no doubt that she had lived the event in her girlish adolescent fashion.

She had thought that never again would she return to the place which had held such dread memories for her. Thoughts of the long summer days and the dreary, interminable winter when the distractions of love or war drove the farmer had been reviving to her. To live within a few miles of where that dreadful tragedy had occurred. To live amidst the memories which must ever be reminding her of her dead lover. These things had made her shrink from the thought of the time when she would again turn westward to her home.

But when she had once more taken her place in the daily life at the farm it was at first with a certain feeling of self disgust and later with thankfulness that she learns that she could face her old life with perfect equanimity. The childish passion for her dead lover had died, the shock which had suddenly brought about her own translation from girlhood to womanhood had also dispelled the illusions of her girlish first love.

She no longer listened to anybody, but just went about her daily work of farm work in a self-sufficient way, striving in every means to lighten her mother's burden and to help her brother to the path which their father before them had so diligently trodden.

Her father had gone down way under the wearing tal of Her eyes dissatisfaction and it seemed as though a rupture between them were imminent.

"Oh, well, and if you consider that," Herve's retorted after a deliberate pause.

"It is duty, you say?" He denes's two brown eyes flashed round on him in an instant. "You are the sort of man who should speak of duty, Herve. You just ought to be ashamed of yourself. You owe me a debt of duty towards you was I killed on the day you left the farm years ago. She provided you with liberal capital to start you in life. Now you have come back and she welcomes you with open arms. We both do—glad that you should be with us again. And what do you have you made to her for her goodness? I'll tell you, you have brought her nothing but days of unhappiness with your lazy, grumbling ways. If you are going to continue like

this, for goodness' sake go away again. She has enough on her shoulders without being worried by you."

The man looked for a moment as though he were going to give expression to some very nasty talk. Prudence had retorted to her pains and so lost the advantage of his expressive eyes. Then his look changed to a mocking smile, and when he spoke his words were decidedly concealing.

"I'm afraid I've done something to offend you, Miss. But you shan't use hard words. I'm that. I know I'm not much of a farmer and I am always a bit unstable when I am not my own master. But don't let a quarrel. I wanted to talk to you about George Iredale. He seems a jolly decent fellow—much too good to be kicking his heels about in such a district as Owlfoot. He's extremely wealthy, isn't he?"

The girl felt angry still, but Hervey's tone slightly mollified her. She answered shortly enough, and the skimming of the milk was not done with the adeptness which she usually displayed.

"Rich? Yes, he's one of the richest men in Manitoba. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. He seems very interested in—us. He's always over here. And he never by any chance loses an opportunity of ingratiating himself with mother. I wonder what his object is?"

Prudence bent over her work to hide the tell-tale flush which had spread over her face, and the skimming was once more done with the utmost care.

"Mother is very fond of Mr. Iredale," she replied slowly. "He is a good man and a good friend. We, as you know, are his nearest neighbours. Are you going over there to-day?"

"I think so. Why?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter—I was going to ask you to ride over to Lakeville to ask Alice Gordon to come here during the harvesting. She's staying with the Cosills. But it doesn't matter in the least. I can send one of the boys."

"Yes, better send one of the boys. I'm going over to Lonely Ranch. I shall cultivate Iredale; he's the only man I care about round here."

Prudence had only completed her operations and was salting the cream in the pail.

"Say, sis, did it ever strike you that Iredale's dead sweet on you?" Hervey went on coarsely.

The girl suddenly turned and boxed her brother squarely in the face. Her brow was again flushed, but now with anger.

"You'll lose the best of your shute if you don't hurry. You've got ten minutes. And I'm going to lock up."

Her brother didn't offer to move.

"Why do you do all this work?" he went on calmly.

"Why don't you send all the milk to the Government creamery? It'll save labour, and you get market price for the produce."

"Because Government creameries are for those who can't afford to send their stuff to market, or make their cheese on their farms."

"Ah, that's the worst of being large farmers, it entails so much work. By Jove! Iredale doesn't work like we 'moss backs' have to, and he's made a fortune. I guess if there were a Mrs. George Iredale she'd have a bully time. No cheese or butter making eh, sis?" And, with a grin, Hervey turned on his heel and, passing up the steps, walked away towards the barn.

Prudence waited until her brother had disappeared within the stables, then she locked up. As she turned from the door she heard her mother's voice calling.

"Girl—girl, where are you?"

"Here I am, mother dear, at the creamery."

Mrs. Malling tramped round the corner of the house.

"Prudence, there's young Peter Laffer come over and I haven't time to stop and gossip with him. Take as not be don't want to talk to a body like me, anyway. Just drop that skirt o' yours, girl and go and see him. A nice time o' day to come a-cortin'. He'll be a-follerin' you to the grain fields when we're harvesting."

Prudence stared.

"Never mind, mother. He's come at an opportune moment. I want a messenger to go over to Lakeville. He'll do. I'm sending word to Alice Gordon. I want her to come here for the harvesting. Alice must get very sick of living at Ansley, in spite of the fact of her beau being there. I've a good mind to tell her to bring him out here. Shan't be long dear. I'll join you directly. Where are you? In the wash house?"

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The girl ran off, letting her skirt fall as she went. The maid followed on to the wash-house, muttering to herself as she went,

"I say, if he were only like her. But there, the Lord forbid, and there as things their offices, in the world must abide the racket. But I give heart to the man about the house who idles. There's a new one, and like his poor father. And I'm not yet to go to the new strand late to bring around in Winnipeg. He's too fond of his company."

The old lady continued to mutter and fidget until she reached the wash-house door, where she disappeared. As she stepped off her thoughts led her horse out of the barn, jumped on its back, and rode away.

It was noon when Hervey reached Owl Hunt. He had been there several times lately, sometimes at George Lindale's invitation, but generally at his own. He had his own particular reasons for cultivating the owner of Lonely Ranch, and these reasons he kept carefully to himself. This unworthy son had only been at Lone Star farm for a little more than four months, and during that brief period he had plainly shown what manner of man he was. Even the darling affection of his mother had not been able to bat a single eye to his shortcomings. Each month since his coming he had steadily overdrawn his allowance to an enormous extent. His frequent visits to Winnipeg had always ended in his return home with pockets empty and an accumulation of debts of which he said nothing left behind him. Then came the inevitable request for money, generally backed up by some miserable excuse, and Hervey's cheque book was always forthcoming on these occasions. But though hitherto she had not failed him, he saw by her manner that the time was not far distant when her sweet old face would become seriously set, and the kindly mouth would shut itself, and the cheque book would never be asked in her service, while he poured his financial excuses on stone deaf ears.

He understood his mother. She would do much, perhaps far too much for her children, but she would not allow herself to be preyed upon. She was too keen a business woman for that. Her son's accumulation of debts was now so great that all he was able to borrow for would

be but a drop in the ocean. In Winnipeg he posed as the owner of Leach Duke farm, and as such his credit was extensive. But now there were clamorings for settlements, and all eyes knew that gaming debts and hotel bills must be met in due course. Tradersmen can wait, they have access from owners of property, but the others have not. Leach Duke repaying themselves, therefore they must be paid if he wished to remain in the district. Now he turned to raise what he required from Iredale. He had recognized the fact that Iredale was in love with the younger was he able to appreciate the possibilities which his matter suggested as a money raising means. Yes, he very sternly told Iredale should pay for the privilege of enjoying his sister's society. Money he must have, and that at once.

It was a wild, desolate region which he rode across on his way to Lonely Ranch. No one would have been suddenly dropped into the midst of this world of covered tracks and clear-cut ravines. The border-strewn, grassless land, would have dreamed that they were within half-a-dozen miles of the fertile prairie lands of Canada. It was like a realm hidden away in the heart of a fashionable city. The country round the mysterious Lake of the Woods is something utterly apart from the rest of the Canadian world and partakes much of the nature of the Blacklands of Dakota. It is tucked away in the extreme north-eastern corner of Manitoba, and the international boundary runs right through the heart of it.

Lonely Ranch was situated in an abrupt hollow, and was entirely lost to view in a mammoth growth of pine woods. Years ago a settlement had existed in this region, but what the nature of that settlement it was now impossible to tell. Local tradition held that at some far distant period, the place had been occupied by a camp of half-breeds, who worked their extra trade upon the north side of the American border, and sought security in the shelter of this perfect hiding place. Be that as it may, it was now the abode of two or three trappers. He had built for himself a splendid house of brown logs, and his outbuildings—many of them the restored houses of the early settlers—and corrals formed a ranch of very large dimensions.

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And it was all hidden away in black woods which defied the keenest observation of the passer-by. And the relation was approached by a circumspect trail which entered the cutting at its northern end. Any other mode of ingress was impossible for any beast of burden.

As Hervey entered the valley and became lost to view in the winter woods, he was greeted by the wailing cry of a screech owl. So sudden and unexpected was the ear-piercing cry that both horse and rider started. The horse threw up its head and snorted, and stood for an instant trembling with apprehension. Hervey looked into it keenly. He could see nothing but the crowd of leafless tree trunks and a cold, dreary landscape which covered the surrounding earth. The owl was perched high up in the hollow of some dead tree for there were many about. He pursued his horse forward. The animal moved cautiously, dancing along in its nervous apprehension.

Presently as they came to the air. Again some owl had protested at his intrusion.

So suddenly did the cry come that Hervey felt a slight superstitious quiver pass down his back, but he rode on. He had nearly a mile of the valley to travel before he came to the house, and during the journey seven times came the hideous screech of the owl. So he began to understand why the place was called "Howl Hunt."

It was with a feeling of relief that he at length saw the ranch through the trees, and he greeted Jeddah, who was standing in his doorway when he dismounted with genuine pleasure.

"Well," he said, after shaking his head by the hand, "another mile of this kind of road and I should have turned tail and fled back to the open. Why you must have a regular army of owls in the place. When I never heard such a sound since my life. It was just that I haven't heard them before when I came here?"

Jeddah took his visitor's horse. He was dressed in civilian. Underneath his loose, disreputable vest he wore a soft shirt, and in place of a collar, as he had a red bandana tied about his neck. His headgear was a Victorian hat. In this garb he looked much more civil and powerful than in the tweeds he usually wore when visiting at the farm. His strong, patient face was lit by a quiet smile. He was a man whose eyes, and the



expression of his features, never betrayed his thoughts. A keen observer would have noticed this at once, but to such people as he encountered he merely appeared a kindly man who was not much given to talking.

"Colony of owls, eh?" he said, leading the horse in the direction of the barn. "Those cries you have heard are what this cheerful place takes its name from. It only needs one cry to set the whole valley ringing with them. Had not the first creature seen you approach you might have reached your destination without hearing or disturbing sound. As a rule, in the daytime they are not heard, but at night no one can enter these woods without the echoes being aroused. When they begin to shriek there is no sleep for any one in my house."

"So I should say. Well, never mind them now, we have other matters on hand. What coverts are we going to shoot over first?"

Hervey had followed his host to the stable. A strange-looking little creature came from the obscurity within. He was an undersized man with a small face, which seemed somehow to have shrivelled up like a dead leaf. He had a pair of the snake-eyes Hervey had ever seen, and not a vestige of hair on his face. His head was covered with a crown of bristly grey hair that seemed to grow in patches, and his feet were both turned in one direction—to the right.

"Take this pig and give him a rub down, Chriss," said Iredale. "When he's cool, water and feed him. Mr. Mallory won't need him until about eight o'clock."

Then he turned towards the house.

"He don't waste words," observed Hervey, indicating the man, who had silently disappeared into the stable, taking the horse with him.

"No, he's dumb," replied Iredale. "He's my head boy."

"Boy?"

"Yes. Sixty-two."

The two men passed into Iredale's sitting-room. It was plainly but comfortably furnished in a typical back-woods manner. There were more signs of the owner's sporting propensities in the room than anything else, the walls being arranged with gun-racks, fishing-tackle, and trophies of the chase.

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"We'll draw the fush on the other side of the point if I otherwise known as the 'Haunted Hill,' said he, is passing in a gun rack. "Select your weapon. I shall take a mixed lot—ten and twelve. We may not catch. There are some geese in a swamp over that way. The cartridges are in the box here. Be yourself to a good supply, and one of those haversacks."

Hervey did as his host suggested.

"Why 'Haunted Hill'?" he asked curiously.

Iredale shrugged.

"By reason of a little graveyard on the side of it. Evidently where the early settlers buried their dead. It is a local name given, I suppose, by the peasant folk of your neighbourhood. Come on."

The two men set out. Nor did they return until six o'clock. Their shoot was productive of a splendid bag—prairie chickens and geese. Both men were excellent shots. Iredale was perhaps the better of the two, at least his bag numbered two brace more than that of his companion, but then, as Hervey told him, he was using a strange gun, whilst Iredale was using the weapon he most favoured. Six o'clock was passed by the time they returned to the house. Iredale, healthy, hungry and calmly contented sat down to the meal. Hervey, famished by his unusual exercise, joined him in the loudest of good spirits.

Towards the close of the meal, when the whisky and water Hervey had liberally poured himself with had had due effect, he broached the subject that was ever uppermost in his thoughts. He began expansively—

"You know, George," he had already admitted the familiarity, and Iredale had not time used to show disapproval, probably he remembered the relationship between this man and Prudence, "I'm sick of farming. It's too monotonous. Not only that, so long as another lives I am a little better than a hired man. Of course she's very good—he went on, as he noted a sudden lowering of his companion's eye-lid, "does no end for me, and all that sort of thing—but my money goes nowhere with a man who has well who has hitherto had considerable resources. It's no easy thing under the circumstances to keep my expenses down. It seems such nonsense, when one comes to think of it, that I, who will eventually own

the farm, subject, of course, to some provision for Prudence to put up with a trifling allowance paid out to her every month at a really monstrous. Who ever heard of a fellow living on one hundred dollars a month? That's what I'm getting. Well, I owe more than five months' wages at the Northern Union Hotel in Winnipeg. It can't be done; that's all about it."

Iredale looked over at the dark face opposite him. Nor could he help drawing a comparison between the man and the two ladies who owned him, one as brother, the other as son. How utterly unlike them he was in every way. There was not the smallest resemblance in mind, face or figure. His thoughts reverted to Sam McLaughlin here they paused. Here was the reason for a lot of awkward forebodings, and he wondered what unfathomed depths he had lain in the nature of the old farmer which could have encouraged themselves in such developed form to the new. It was inconceivable that this indolent, somewhat wealth-shifty could have inherited his nature from Sam McLaughlin. No, he felt sure that some former ancestor must have been responsible for it. He understood the trait of Hervey's morals in a twinkling. He had expected it to be sort of thing before from other men. Now he did not discourage it.

"A hundred a month on the prairie should be a princely allowance," he said in his grave way. "Of course it might be different in a city."

"It is," said Hervey decidedly. "I don't know, I'm sure," he went on, after a moment's pause. "I suppose I must weather through somehow."

He looked across at Iredale in such a definitely meaning way that the latter had no hesitation in speaking plainly. He knew it was money, and this was Prudence's brother.

"Got into a mess?" he suggested encouragingly.

Hervey felt that he had an easy victim, but he smoked peacefully for a moment before he spoke, keeping his great eyes turned watchfully upon the table-top.

"I am. I lost a lot of money at poker the last time I was in the city. I was in an awful streak of bad luck, could do nothing right. Generally it's the other way about. Now they're pressing me to redeem the I.O.U.'s. When they owe me I notice they're not so eager about it."

"That's bad, I'm sorry to hear it," Iredale's eyes

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were smiling, whilst in their faces there was the faintest suggestion of irony. He was in no way impressed by the breadth of the suggestion. It was the old story. He, too, lit his pipe and, and back in his chair. "I hope the amount is not too overwhelming. If I can—er—be—"

Hervey interrupted him eagerly. He brought his hand down heavily upon the table.

"By Jove! you are a good sort, George. If you could—just a loan, of course—you see I can offer you security on my certain inheritance of the farm."

But Iredale had no wish to hear anything about his future possibilities of inheritance. He interrupted him sharply and his tone was bitter as it is.

"That old man! Never mind what that. In spite of your need of cash, I hope it will be many a year before your mother leaves our farming world."

"I trust so," murmured Hervey, without enthusiasm.

"How much will you ask your creditors?"

Iredale spoke with such indifference about the amount that Hervey was only decided to double the sum he originally intended to ask for.

"Five thousand dollars," he said, with some show of diffidence, but with eyes that gazed hungrily towards this man who treated the loaning of a large amount in such a careless manner.

Iredale offered no comment. He merely rose from his seat, and opening a drawer in his bookcase produced a cheque-book and a pen and ink. He made out a cheque for the amount named, and passed it across the table. His only remark was—

"Your luck may change. Pay me when you like. No, don't bother about a receipt."

Hervey seized upon the piece of paper. He was almost too staggered to tender his thanks. Iredale in his quiet way was watching, not was any movement on his countenance apart from his servant eyes. He had "sized" this man up, from the soles of his boots to the crown of his head, and his contempt for him was profound. But he gave no sign. His courtesy was apparently perfect. The five thousand dollars were nothing to him, and he felt that the giving of that cheque might save those of

Loon Dyke Farm from a world of anxiety and trouble. Somehow behind that impassive face he may have had some thoughts of the coming of a future time when he would be able to deal with this man's mode of life with that firmness which only rebellion could entitle him to, when he could personally relieve Elizabeth of the responsibility and wearing anxiety of her worthless son's doings. In the meantime like the seafaring man, he would just "stand by."

"I can't thank you enough, George," said Hervey at last. "You have got me out of an awkward situation. If I can do you a good turn, I will." Iredale detected a meaning emphasis in the last remark which he resented. "Some day," the man went on, "but there - I will say no more."

"No, I shouldn't say anything. These things happen in the course of a lifetime, and one mustn't say too much about them." The two men then smoked on in silence.

Presently Hervey rose to go. It was nearly eight o'clock.

"Well," said Iredale, as he prepared to bid his guest good-bye, "we have had a good afternoon's sport. Now you know my coverts you must come over again. Come whenever you like. If I am unable to go with you, you are welcome to shoot over the land by yourself. There are some grand antelope about the place."

"Thanks. I shall certainly come again. And - well, when are you coming over to us again? I can't offer you any shooting."

"Don't trouble," smiled Iredale.

Hervey saw the "boy" clattering his horse round. "You might tell your mother," the rancher went on, "that I'll come to-morrow to read over that fencing contract she spoke about for her."

Hervey leered round upon him.

"Will it do if I tell Prue instead?"

"Certainly not." Iredale's face was quite expressionless at that moment. "You will please do as I ask."

Hervey gripped down his chin, but his eyes were alight with the anger from which his lips refrained. He mounted his horse.

"Well, good-bye, George," he said, with a great display

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of cordiality. "I hope those owls of yours will permit me to ride in peace."

"I have no doubt they will," replied Iredale with an inscrutable smile. "Good-bye."

Hervey rode away. The man he had left remained standing at his front door. The horseman had tied up his saddle as the bush closed about him.

"Curse the man for his d—d superiority," he muttered. "I suppose he thinks I am bound. Well, V. Iredale, we've made a pleasant start from my point of view. If you intend to marry Prudence you'll have to pay the paper. Guess I'm that paper. It's money I want, and it's money you'll have to pay."

The mysterious owner of Lotus Ranch was thinking deeply as he watched his guest depart.

"I believe he's the greatest scoundrel I have ever encountered," he said to himself. "Money? Why, he'd sell his soul for it, or I'm no judge of men of his calibre. And worse luck, I know his soul well enough. I wonder what made me do it? Not the idea of Prudence? No, not exactly. And yet I don't know. I think I'd sooner have him on my side than against me." Then he turned his eyes towards the curials and out through which were dotted about amongst the trees a little way. They settled upon a little clearing on the side of Fox Hill. It was a graveyard of the early settlers. "Yes, I must break away from it all, and as soon as possible. I have stayed on for many a year, but the fascination of it has held me. If I hope to ever marry Prudence I must give it up. I must not dare not let her discover the truth. The child's goodness drives me to despair. Yes, it shall all go."

His gaze wandered in the direction Hervey had taken, and a troubled look came into his calm eyes. A moment later he turned suddenly with a shiver and passed into the house. Somehow his thoughts were very gloomy.

## CHAPTER X

### THE GRAVEYARD AT OWL HUNT

PRUDENCE and Alice Gordon surveyed the wild scene that lay before them. They had drawn their horses up to a standstill on the brow of no inconsiderable hill, and beyond stretched a panorama of strikingly picturesque beauty. Nature in one of her noblest moods of verdant and profound was revealed.

Alice was a pretty girl, rather ordinary, and ever ready for a flight, which helped to conceal an undercurrent of serious thought. She was an old pupil of Sarah Gurrige's, and consequently Prudence's school friend. But Alice lived in Ansley, where, report had it, she was "keeping company" with Robb Chillingwood, and now the two girls only met when Alice visited the farm at such seasons of the year as the present.

"Do you think it will be safe to go further?" asked Alice, in a tone of awestruck amazement. "You say you are sure of the way. Well, it not be better to turn off here and make for Lonely Ranch, and seek Chatz's guidance? There is time enough, and it is so easy to get lost."

The girls had set out to visit Lonely Ranch, to enjoy a ramble and a sort of picnic in the surrounding woods. Iredale was away on business, and the two friends, availing themselves of the opportunity, were taking a day off from the duties of the farm. They had started with the intention of riding over and leaving their horses with Iredale's man, Chatz, and then proceeding on foot. At the last moment Prudence had changed her mind and decided on a visit to the great Lake of the Woods, which was two miles further on to the south-west of the ranch. They carried their provisions in their saddle-bags, and

had made up their minds to find some suitable break in the woods on the shore of the lake where they could tether their horses and go in the afternoon away.

Instead of turning into the valley of Owl II not they had crossed the mouth of it, and were now at the summit of its eastern slope, gazing out upon the mysteries of the almost unbroken and regions beyond.

"Of course it's safe, you silly," said Prudence. "Why suppose we were to lose ourselves: that old mare you are riding would take you home straight as the crow flies. Besides, I have no fancy for that ferret-faced Clint becoming one of our party. We could never talk freely in front of him."

"All right, then," said Alice, with a sigh. "You are leader of this expedition. Isn't the woods look gloomy? And look out beyond. There seems to be no end to them. Shall we stop and have dinner here, and ride on afterwards?"

"Certainly not, madam," Prudence said briskly. "No shirking, besides, we want water to make our tea. There's none here."

Prudence understood her friend's fears, which were not without reason. It was a simple thing to get lost in such a forest. But anyway, as she had said, the old pines between they were riding would carry them home should they mistake the road. There was really no danger.

It was a gorgeous day. The sun was shining with unabated splendour, as yet it wanted an hour to noon. The brilliant daylight was somehow different here to what it was on the prairie. The fierce sunlight poured down upon an under-ten carpet of dull green, which seemed to have in it a tinge of the blackness of the heavy tree trunks which it revealed beneath. The result was curiously striking. The brightness of the day was dulled, and the earth seemed bathed in a peculiar light such as a vault of grey marble is always it bestows. The girls, gazing into the valley which yawned at their feet, were looking into a half-wet hollow of sombre melancholy, unchanging, unrelieved.

Beyond stretched a vista of hills growing steadily greater as the haze distance was reached. Behind where



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they stood was the first forest valley and woodlands on any scale, until the peak was reached.

The moments passed and they made no effort to move. They were both lost in thought and seemed not aware of the wild surroundings with eyes which sought only that which was most profoundly beautiful. Providence was depicting the scene, the red tent air which came from the woods felt as the artistic grandeur of the world about her, with all its light and shadow, its varied gulf. And merely one word arrived at the point before her. She was less enthusiastic but still with such surroundings than her companion. They affected her differently. She was not the same. The great forest scene was not as she felt. At length Peter went back the distance. She lifted her head and her hands turned forward.

"Come along Alice," she said. And the two disappeared down the slope to the great forest lake.

Once on their way Alice saw a few great spirits again. When the forest tall, white and red, seemed to rest on confusing to the eye. The either hand, ahead, were to be seen only bare tree trunks, with a few green, green, which shot out the sunlight from above. The sound of the pine-needles rushing under the hands of the fingers carried a welcome sense of excitement to the riders. Alice found the nearly much less fearful than the contemplation from the heights above. In a few moments both girls were chatting freely of thoughts of being themselves, or of other dangers which their virgin forests might conceal, having passed from their minds.

Whatever doubts may have assailed Alice they were soon set at rest, for in a short time after ascending another rather sharp slope they found themselves going down upon a long, narrow sheet of water. It was one of the many inlets with which the shores of the mysterious Lake of the Woods abounded. From where the girls first caught sight of it it looked as though the forest had been cleanly rent by the glistening water which had cut its way into the dense growth, demolishing everything of vegetation in its path, but leaving everything which grew even down to its very edge. The inlet widened out between two hills, and beyond that, in a dancing bow, the vast body

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of the lake like a distant view of the sea, was just visible. It was a perfect picture.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" said Prudence enthusiastically.

"Isn't it worth a few miles' ride to see it?" I inquired. "I'm glad we didn't go and bother that horrid little cheta. It would have taken half the pleasure away to have had his ferret's face with us."

"Lovely, lovely," exclaimed Alice rapturously. Her bright eyes were dancing with delight, and her breath came and went rapidly. "Just fancy, Prue. I have lived all these years within reach of this place and this is the first time I have ever set eyes upon the lake."

Her companion laughed.

"That is not to be wondered at. There are very few people who ever come this way. Why I couldn't say, unless it is that the country is bad to travel through on this side. Mind, although there are few halutations on the western shore, there are plenty to the east and south. I never could understand why George Leslie selected this spot for the site of his ranch. I still think how delightful it would be to have a summer home on this hill." The girl indicated the position with her riding-whip.

"Wouldn't it be delightful to wake each morning and gaze out upon such a scene?"

"Perfect," said Alice, whilst her eyes glanced rapturously in her friend's direction. "Summer or winter?"

"Summer, of course, you guess," exclaimed Prudence.

"Of course, winter would be different, wouldn't it?"

Alice was laughing, but Prudence was quite serious.

"Yes, that's the worst of all Nature's finest handiwork. There's always some drawback to it. High winter in this place would be too dreadful to contemplate. These rocks are only fit for Indians and coyotes and wolves when the summer is over."

"But it's a heavenly spot now," said Alice. Suddenly she raised her whip and pointed. Far down, out upon the surface of the silvery belt of water, a tiny speck was slowly moving. At first so distant was it that it appeared to be stationary, but after a while it was distinctly to be seen moving. "What is it?" she inquired sharply.

"Looks like a boat," replied Prudence. "I wonder where?"

"I give it up. Does Mr. Iradale keep a boat?"

Although Prudence was the elder of the two girls she was much blither than her sister. She was ever ready of the prairie. She had no suspicion of the apparently innocent inquiry.

"I don't think so. I never really heard. No, I should think that most belong to some Indians or half-breed fishermen. There are some of those people about, I believe."

She continued to watch the boat for some moments. The less serious girl began to have allowed her attention to wander. Prudence saw the boat approach the near shore. Then it disappeared under the shadow of the towering pines. An exclamation from Alice drew her attention.

"Look over the other side. Prudence, there's another boat. It has just shot out from that great clump of undergrowth. Why, there are a dozen people in it. Look! Look! They are racing along. Where's the other gone?"

It disappeared under this bank. Ah, the other one is following in its wake. Yes, I should say there are Indians."

"Let us go on down. We can see better from the bank. Mr. Iradale is around. I didn't know there was so much fishing here. Mr. Iradale never speaks of it."

"I don't think Mr. Iradale sees much of the lake. His land, that is his grating, lies to the west of the house. But he rarely talks about his work. As he says, so few people care about this wild district that he does not like to worry folks by reminding them of its existence."

All the same," replied Alice, "one of these fine days some enterprising American will come along and find out some of the present unknown wealth in the place and then the settlers round the district will kick themselves. That is, I think, he sitting down on his hundred and sixty acres and never moving beyond the limits of his fencing. I like this word place with its woods, its hills and valleys, its lakes and its mysterious boats. You should draw George. I mean Mr. Iradale out. There must be a deal that is of interest here."

"Why should I draw him out?" asked Prudence innocently as the horses arrived down the hill towards the shore of the lake. "You ask him. I believe he'd like to tell some one all about it."

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"No, thanks, friend Prue," said Alice calmly. "I'm not what you might call a 'free agent.' I am a young man, to wit a free-trader, who might object. Besides, I have not turned poacher yet."

"What on earth do you mean?"

Prudence turned a pair of astonished brown eyes on her companion. Alice did not answer, and the two looked squarely into each other's faces. The elder girl read the meaning which Alice did not attempt to conceal, and a warm blush mounted quickly and suffused her sun-tanned face.

Then followed a long silence, and the crackling of the pine-cones beneath the hoofs of the lone animal and the echoes of the winds. Prudence was thinking deeply. A thoughtful puck reflected the perfect arch of her brows, and her half-closed eyes were turned upon her horse's mane.

George Iredale. What a man? He seemed so to have grown into her life of late that she would now scarcely recognize him at faro without him. This sudden reminder made her look back over the days since her return from "down East" and she realized that George, since that time, had eternally formed part of her life. He was always in her thoughts in some way or other. Every one on the farm spoke of him as if he belonged to it. Hardly a day passed but what some portion of it was spent by him in her company. His absence was only when his business took him elsewhere.

And what was the meaning of it all? What was he to her that her friend should talk of "poaching" when regarding her own intercourse with this man? Prudence's face grew hotter. The awakening had come. At that moment she knew that George Iredale was a good deal to her, and she felt a certain maidenly shame at the discovery. He had never uttered a word of love to her, not one, in all the years she had known him, and unbidden she had given him her love. In those lost moments of realization her heart was filled with sweet agony like that which was not wholly without a feeling of joy. She felt herself flushing under the thoughts conjured by her friend's implication, and her feelings became worse as Alice went on.

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"Ah, Prue, you can't hide these things from me. I have always intended to say something, but you are such an austere person that I was afraid of getting a snub. Mr. Iredale is a charming man, and well—I hope when it comes off you'll be very, very happy."

"Don't be absurd, Alice." Prudence had recovered herself now.

"My dear Prue," the girl retorted emphatically, and imitating the other's lofty tone, "George Iredale just worships the ground you walk on. One word of encouragement from you, if you haven't already given it to him, and in a short time you will be the mistress of Lonely Ranch."

"Nothing of the sort."

"My dear girl, I know."

"You know less than you think you do, and I am not going to listen to any more of your nonsense."

Prudence touched her horse's flank with her heel and trotted on ahead of her companion. But in her heart she knew that what Alice had said was true.

Alice called after her to wait. The trees were so closely set that she had difficulty in steering clear of them, but Prudence was obstinate and kept right on. Nor did she draw rein until the shore of the lake was reached, and then only did she do so because of the impassable tangle of undergrowth which confronted her. Just as Alice came up with her she started off again at right angles to the direction they had come, riding parallel with the bank. Alice, breathless and laughing, followed in her wake, until at length a break in the trees showed them a grassy patch which sank slowly down in a gentle declivity to the water's edge. By the time this was reached Prudence's good humour was quite restored.

"A nice dance you've led me," expostulated Alice, as they dismounted and began to off saddle.

"Serve you right for your impertinence," Prudence smiled over at the other.

"All the same I'm right."

"Now keep quiet, or I'll ride off again and leave you."

"So you can if you like. This old mare I'm riding will take me home straight as the crow flies. What's that?"

Out across the water came a long-drawn cry, so weird

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not so human that the two girls stared still as statues, their faces bracing under the tan. The echoes seemed to be halting, as if gradually entering a room. Alice's eyes were moist with staring, and fixed with an expression of horror. Pelele recovered herself first. She laughed a little constrainedly, however.

"We are in the region of Owl Hunt," she said significantly. "That was one of the screech owls."

"Owl? I thought it was some one being murdered."

"We shall probably hear lots of strange cries. These people are warned for them. You've got the kettle on your ear, too. Ah! Get all the things out whilst I gather some kindling and make a fire."

"For goodness sake don't leave me here alone for long," Alice entreated. "I won't mention George's name again, sure."

But Pelele had tethered her horse and set off on her quest. Alice left alone, unlocked her horse and proceeded to drag up the contents of her saddle bags and also those on her feet, and so. This done she stepped down to the water's edge and pushing the sandy vegetation or one side filled the kettle. As she rose from her task she looked out down the wide inlet. The view was an enchanting one. The wooded hills opposite her rose abruptly from the water, overshadowing it and throwing a black reflection upon its still surface. There was not a breath of air stirring; the world seemed wood-wildly still.

Away to the left the water widened out, and was overhung by a haze of heat. She was about to turn away when, from out of the distance there appeared another long boat. Instantly the girl was all attention. The boat was not traveling in the same direction as were those they had first seen, but was making for the point where the others had appeared. She had a much better view down here at the bank of anything moving on the lake than from the higher land and she could not help being struck by the fact that wherever the occupants of the strange craft they were not Indians. One man was standing in the stern steering the boat by the aid of a long paddle, and this man was garbed in white man's attire. The distance she was away from the object of her curiosity prevented her distinguishing the features of these people.

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of the lake; but that which was apparent to her was the fact that they were not fishermen, nor was their boat a fisherman's boat. It was long, and built with the narrowness of a river-lake canoe, and so low in the water that its gunwale looked to be within an inch of the glassy surface.

So intent was the girl upon this strange apparition that she did not notice Prudence's return, and as the strange craft disappeared within the undergrowth of the opposite shore she turned with a start at the sound of her friend's voice beside her.

"Another boat," asked Prudence, "or the one we saw before?"

"Another."

There was a silence; then the two turned away and prepared their dinner.

They pitched their camp in the shade, and the meal was quickly prepared. The smoke from their fire helped to keep off the few late summer mosquitoes that hummed drowsily upon the sultry air. Everything was wonderfully peaceful and sleepy about their little encampment. Not a leaf stirred or a bough creaked, there was the stillness of death over all. Gradually the silence communicated itself to the girls, and the pauses in their chatter grew longer and their eyes more thoughtful. Even their horses for the most part stood idly by. The green grass had but a passing attraction for them. They nibbled at it occasionally, it is true, but with apparently little appetite. After dinner the two friends spread their saddle blankets upon the grass, and stretched themselves thereon in attitudes of comfort, from which they could look out across the shining surface of the lake, and soon their talk almost entirely ceased. Then, for a while they lay dreaming the time away in happy waking dreams of the future.

Alice had brooded for a moment the rules which divided Owl Hoot from Ambley, and her thoughts were with her sturdy lover, Robert Hallowood. She was contemplating their future together, that future which would contain for them if no great ease and luxury, at least the happiness of a perfect love and mutual assistance in times of trial. Her practical mind did not permit her to gaze on visionary times of prosperity and rise to position, but rather she

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considered their present living income and what they too could do with it. Now and again she rebelled not with any feeling of discontent, but merely at the triumph of her own ability to neglect her future husband's resources. She was in a serious mood and pondered long upon these to her all important things.

Phyllis's thoughts were of a very different nature although she too was thinking of the man whom her little consolation had brought so prominently into her life. Her usual dark face was clouded with a look of uncertainty and at first the distant nature of her reflections was her business in the new state of her own feelings. Now everything was clear to her of the man in which George Iredale had steadily grown into her daily life and how her own fondly clinging for him had already ripened into something warmer. He was so quiet so unimpassionate, so good and kind. She now knew she had grown accustomed to look for and aided by his focus as in matters which required more consideration than she could give matters which were beyond her. She understood the strong silent nature which underlain the quiet reserve. And now when she came to think of it, all the days of her grown womanhood he had ever been near her seeking her society always. There was just that brief period during which Leslie Grey had ruined her heart with his tempestuous manner for the rest it was Iredale. She tried to shut him out, to contemplate his removal from the round of her daily life. Instantly the next real of that life lost its brightness and radiance and her work appeared to her a very dreary smudge of existence too. Yes, Alice had survived the keynote, and Phyllis's heart had responded with the chord of sympathy. She knew now that she loved George Iredale.

This realization was not wholly pleasurable, for with it came a sudden grip of fear at her simple heart. Her thoughts went back to some eight months before. And she found herself again looking into the death-chamber at the Louisa Beckett house. That scene had no longer power to move her. It set out in the way one might have expected. She no longer loved the dead man. He had passed from her thoughts as though she had never



ered to him. But a new feeling had sprung up in her heart which the realization of this indifference had brought. And this feeling filled her with an utter self-loathing. She shivered as she thought of her own heartlessness, the shadow nature which was hers. She remembered her feelings at that bedside as she listened to the dying man's last words. Worst of all, she remembered how, in the paroxysm of her grief, she had sworn to discover the murderer of Leslie Grey and see justice administered. Now she asked herself, What had she done? And the answer came in all its callous significance: Nothing!

She looked herself, her face was very pale. Her thoughts framed themselves into unspoken words.

"If this is the way I have fulfilled my promise to the dead of this in the extent and depth of my love, then I am the most worthless woman on earth. What surety can I give that my love for George is a better thing than was my affection for Leslie Grey?"

She sat herself up, she looked over at her companion and noted the drooping eyelids. Her features were strangely set, and her smooth forehead wore a disturbing frown. Then she spoke in a sharp tone that startled the girl beside her.

"Alice, do you think it is possible to imagine you are in love with a man? I mean, that you honestly believe you love him at the time and really do not?"

Alice endeavoured to collect her wandering thoughts.

"Why, yes, I suppose so. I've been in love with a dozen men at one time and another, never longer than a month with any one of them. I never go to a dance but what I fall in love with at least two of my partners, and my undying affection for both just lasts the evening out. Imagination is strongly developed in some people—when they're young."

"No, be serious."

Alice gazed at the other curiously. Then—

"But with it I'm sure. What is it that's troubling you? Your face is significant of some dire tragedy."

"How long have you been engaged to Robb Chillingwood?"

"Nearly six months. Why?"

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"And you've never thought of any other man?"

Alice shook her head. For once she was quite serious.

"Couldn't look at another man. Robb hasn't got two cents to his name, but I'm going to marry him or—  
or—die an old maid."

For a moment the expression of Prudence's face relaxed, but a moment later it set itself into more stern lines than ever.

"Alice, you were right in what you said about George—he went on slowly. "I can hardly believe it myself yet. Leslie Grey has only been dead eight months, and yet he—I am thinking all day long of another man. I believe I am utterly heartless—worthless."

"Well?"

"Well, it's just this. I am not worth an honest man's love. I used to think I worshipped the ground poor Leslie walked on. I'm sure I loved him to distraction," the girl went on passionately. "Very well, suppose George asked me to marry him and I consented. In all probability, in the light of what has gone before, I should be tired of him in a year, and then—  
and then—"

"You're talking nonsense now, Prue," said Alice. She was alarmed at the other's tone. The beautiful face of her friend was quite pale, and sharp lines were drawn about the mouth.

"I'm not talking nonsense," the other went on in a tense, bitter tone. "What I say is true. In less than eight months I have forgotten the dead. I have done nothing to discover the murderer who robbed me of a husband and lover. I have simply forgotten—forgotten him. Put yourself in my place—put your Robb in Leslie's place. What would you have done?"

Alice thought seriously before she answered.

"I should never have rested until I had avenged his death," she said at last, and a hard glitter shone in her eyes. Then a moment after she smiled. "But it is different. I don't think you really loved Leslie Grey. You merely thought you did."

"That only makes it worse," the other retorted. Prudence's face was alight with inflexible resolve. "My debt to the dead must be paid. I see it now in a light in

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which it has never presented itself to me before. I must prove myself to myself before I face her. She brags off only to resume again with a more and passionate earnestness of which Alice had never believed her capable.

"I can never marry George Treble as he takes an avenged death upon my conscience. I can never trust myself. George may love me now. I believe it. I hope so. No, Alice, I will never marry him until now I can be sure he is fulfilled. This shall be my punishment for my heartless forgetfulness."

Alice surveyed her friend for some time without speaking. Then she burst out into a smiling protest.

"You are mad, I see, mad mad, utterly mad. You would throw away a life's happiness for the mere shadow of what you are pleased to consider a duty. Where you would destroy a man's happiness for a meretricious claim. What can you do to undo avenged Lewis's death? You hold no clue. What the justice have failed to do, how can you hope to unravel? If I were a man, do you know what I'd do to you? I'd take you by the shoulders and shake you until that foolish head of yours threatened to part company with your equally foolish body. You should have thought of these things before and not now when you realize how fond you are. I thought set about wrecking two healthy lives. Oh, how you are are a fool! And I can scarcely keep my temper with you." Alice paused for want of breath and lack of room to lay her criticisms on. Treble was looking out across the water. Her expression was quite unchanged. With all the warped line, shadow of the former man, she had fingered the path in which she considered her duty to lie, and was resolved to follow it.

"I have a better clue than you perceive, Alice," she said thoughtfully. "The clue of body and mind. I understand his reference to the *Wandering Jew* Press. That must be the means by which the murderer is discovered. There were not more thieves who did him to death. And I will tell you something else. The notice in that paper to which he referred, you know, is even now inserted at certain times. The man or men who cause that notice to be inserted in the paper were in some way responsible for his death."

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There was a moment's pause. Then Alice spoke quite calmly.

"Tell me, Prue, has George proposed yet?"

"No."

"Ah!" And Alice smiled broadly and turned her eyes towards the setting sun. When she spoke again it was to draw attention to the time. Although by common consent the matter which had been under discussion was left in abeyance.

"It is time to be moving," the girl said. "See, the sun will be down in an hour. Let us have tea and then we'll saddle-up."

Tea was prepared, and by the time the sun dipped below the horizon the horses were re-saddled and a crew was ready for the return journey. They set out for home. Alice was in the cheeriest of spirits, but Prudence was preoccupied even moody. That afternoon spent in the peaceful wilds of the "back" country had left its mark upon her. All her life—her world—seemed suddenly to have changed. It was as though this second coming of love to her had brought with it the banking clouds of an approaching storm. The two rode Indian fashion through the woods and neither spoke for a long time, then, at last, it was Alice who ventured a protest.

"Where are you leading us to, Prue?" she asked. "I am sure this is not the way we came."

Prudence looked round; she seemed as though she had only just awakened from some unpleasant dream.

"Not the way?" she echoed. Then she drew her horse up sharply. She was alert in an instant. "I'm afraid you're right, Al." Then in a tone of perplexity, "Where are we?"

Alice stared at her companion with an expression of dismay.

"Oh, Prue, you've gone and lost us—and the sun is already down."

Prudence gazed about her blankly for a few moments, realizing only too well how truly her companion had spoken. She had not the vaguest notion of the way to a haul come. The forest was very dark. The day-long twilight which reigned beneath the green had darkened with the shadows of approaching night. There was no

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opening in view anywhere, there was nothing but the world of trees, rocks, and beneath their hooves' feet, the soft carpet of rotting vegetation whilst every moment the gloom was deepening to darkness—a darkness blacker than the blackest night.

"What shall we do?" asked Alice, in a tone of horror. Then: "Shall we go back?"

Prudence shook her head. Her prairie instincts were roused now.

"No; come along, give your mare her head. Our horses will find the way."

They touched the animals sharply, and, in response, they moved forward obediently. The old mare Alice was riding took the lead, and the journey was continued. The gloom of the forest communicated something of its depressing influence to the travellers. There was no longer any attempt at talk. Each was intent upon ascertaining their whereabouts and watching the alert movements of the horses' heads and ears. The darkness had closed in on the forest with alarming suddenness, and, in consequence, the progress was slow, but, in spite of this, the assurance with which the horses moved on brought confidence to the minds of the two girls. Prudence was in no way disturbed. Alice was not quite so calm. For an hour they travelled thus, through the endless maze of trees. They followed the hills and descended into valleys, but still no break in the dense foliage above. They had just emerged from one hollow deeper and wider than the rest, and were slowly ascending a steep hill, Prudence was suddenly struck by an idea.

"Alice," she said, "I believe we are heading for the ranch. The valleys all run north and south hereabouts. We are travelling westwards."

"I hope so," replied the other decidedly; "we shall then be able to get on the right trail for home. This is jolly miserable. O—oh!"

The girl's exclamation was one of horror. A screech-owl had just sent its dreadful note in melancholy waves out upon the still night air. It started low, almost inaudible, rose with a hideous crescendo to fortissimo, and then died away like the wail of a lost soul. It came from just ahead of them and to the right. Alice's horse

shied and danced nervously. Prudence's horse stood stock still. "Then, as no further sound came, they started forward again.

"My, but those owls are dreadful things," said Alice. "I believe I nearly fainted."

"Come on," said Prudence. "After all they are only harmless owls." Her consolatory words were as much for the benefit of her own nerves as for those of her friend.

The brow of the hill was passed and they began to descend the other side. Suddenly they saw the twinkling of stars ahead. Alice first caught sight of the welcome clearing.

"An opening at last! True; now we shall find out where we are." An instant later she turned again. "A horse!" she said. "That must be the ranch. Quick, come along."

The blackness of the wood gave place to the starlit darkness of the night. They were about to pass out into the open when suddenly Alice's horse came to a frightened stand. For an instant the mare swerved, then she reared and turned back whence she had come. Prudence checked her horse and looked for what had frightened the other animal.

A sight so weird presented itself that she suddenly raised one hand to her face and covered her eyes in nervous terror. Alice had regained the mastery of her animal and now drew up alongside the other. She looked, and the sharp catching of her breath told of what she saw. Suddenly she gripped Prudence's arm and drew the girl's hand from before her face.

"Keep quiet, Prue," she whispered. "What is this place?"

"The Owl Hoot graveyard. This is the Haunted Hill."

"And those?" Alice was pointing fearfully towards the clearing.

"Are—— Oh, come away, I can't stand it."

But neither girl made a move to go. Their eyes were fixed in a gaze of burning fascination upon the scene before them. Dark, almost black, the surrounding woods threw up in relief the clearing lit by the stars. But even so the scene was indistinct and uncertain. A low broken

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trace surrounded a small patch of ground in the middle of which stood a rounded big tree. From the centre were scattered but a dozen or so in a round circle, round, dotted each in the centre of an irregular circle of earth. Here and there a small stone marked the grave of some dead and gave record of that dead, and a few white rods sprang up as though to further indicate these darker monuments. But it was not these things which had filled the imagination with such horror. It was the crowd of silent living figures that seemed to come from out the ends of the other marked graves, and push, in regular procession, in amongst the roots of the big tree and their disappear. To the girls' distant faces they seemed to be shrunken human forms. These forms were hunched by reason of their heads being bent forward under the pressure of some strange burden which rested on their shoulders. Half of these grave-dwelling phantoms came from out of the ground and passed before their staring eyes and disappeared among the roots. But a sound was made by their swift trailing feet. Thus seemed to float over the ground. Thus all became sick again. Nothing moved and was there even the rustle of a leaf upon the hush of the air. The stars turned bright, and the calm of the night was undisturbed. Alice's grip fell from her companion's arm. Her horse reared and plunged, then taking the bit between its teeth, it set off down the hill in the direction of Ireland's house. The light which had burned in some of the windows had suddenly gone out, and there was nothing now to indicate the way, but the mare made no mistake. Providence gave her horse its head and followed in hot pursuit.

Both animals came to a stand before the door of the barn behind the house where to the girls' joy they found the forest-faced knight apparently awaiting them.

Alice was a maid in a fainting condition, but Providence was more well-placed. She merely told the little man that they had had their way, and asked him assistance to guide them out of the valley to where the trail to Lord John's Farm began. Such was the unexpected ending of their journey.

## CHAPTER XI

### CANINE VAGARIES

THE last stage of the girls' journey—the ride home from the ranch—was like some horrible nightmare. It was as though recollection had suddenly turned itself into a hideous, tangible form which was pursuing them over the dark expanse of prairie. Even their horses seemed to share something of their riders' fears, for their light springing stride never slackened during that ten mile stretch, and they had to be literally forced down to a walk to give them the necessary "breathing." Like their riders, the animals' one idea seemed to be to reach the security of the farm with all possible dispatch.

The farm dogs heralded their approach, and when the girls alid down from their saddles Hephzibah was at the threshold waiting for them. The rest of the evening was spent in recounting their adventures. Hephzibah listened to their narrative, filled with superstitious emotion whilst endeavouring to treat the matter in what she deemed a practical, common-sense manner. She was profoundly impressed. Hervey was there but chose to treat their story with uncompromising incredulity. So little was he interested, although he listened to what was said, as to rouse the indignation of both girls, and only his sudden departure to bed saved a stormy ending to the scene.

It was not until the house was locked up, and Prudence and Alice were preparing to retire—they shared the same bedroom—that Hephzibah Mallin dropped her mask of common-sense and laid bare the quaintly superstitious side of her character. The good farm wife had not lived on the prairie all her life without contracting to the full the superstitious which always come to those whose lives are



gent in such close communion with Nature. She could talk freely with the two girls when no one else was present. She had heard a hundred times the legends pertaining to the true value of Out Hunt, but this was the first time that she had heard the account of the shaggs from eye-witnesses.

She came into the girls' bedroom arrived in a red leotid dressing gown, which had shrunk somewhat in the stress of many washings, and her night cap with its long strings white as driven snow covered her head like a miniature sun-burnt. She came with an eager report of her own and seated herself to read some buttoned letter. Prudence was brushing her hair as Alice was already in bed.

"My dear," she said, as she plopped herself down, "he was waiting for them both, but her round eyes were turned upon Alice, who was sitting up in bed with her hands clasped about her knees. "I've been thinking that maybe we ought ask young Mr. Thelgood out here. It's quite a time since I've seen him. He used to come frequent like before—before " with a sharp glance at her daughter, a few months back. He's a good lad and I think he'd make quite a couple with Mr. Hervey. An it 'ud do 'em a deal of good to air their spurs round. I'm sure they're smothering to be musty. What say?"

Alice smiled and Hephzibah's old eyes twinkled with pleasure. Prudence answered at once.

"That's a good idea, mother, I'll write to him at once for you." Then she turned her smiling face upon the old lady and shook a forefinger at her. "You're an arch-plottin' lady mother. Look at Alice's face. That's not sun-burn, I know."

"Maybe it is," maybe it isn't," replied Mr. Mallory, with a comfortable chuckle, whilst her fat face was turned up towards a gorgeous wind-worked tent which hung directly over the head of the bed. "though I'll not say but what a day in the sun like she's just had mightn't have reddened the skin some."

"I am very sun burnt," said Alice conscientiously.

"Where've you been in the forest where there's no sun, nearly all day?" exclaimed Prudence quickly.

"Ah, them forests—them forests!" observed Hephzibah,

in a pensive tone of reflection. "Folks say strange things about them forests."

"Yes," put in Alice, glad to turn attention from herself. "usually folks talk a lot of nonsense when they attribute supernatural things to certain places. But for once they're right, what do I say, I shall never disbelieve in ghosts again. 'Tis the horror of it, it was awful," and the girl gave a shudder of genuine horror.

"And could you see the gh—em?" asked the old lady in a tone of suppressed excitement.

"No, mother," chimed in Prudence, leaving the dressing-table and seating herself on the patterned coverlet of the bed. "They seemed quite solid."

"If they were big robes," said Alice.

"Did they now?" said Mrs. Nelling, waving her brow meaningly. "But the lo—e has it that spectres is flimsy things as ye can see through—like the steam from under the lid of a stewpan."

"Ye—es," said Alice thoughtfully.

"All I can say is, that I wish Mr. George Iredale can bve brude that graveyard. I tell you, mother, there's no arguing away what we saw. They came up out of one of those graves and marched in a procession into the ruined dead house," said Prudence seriously.

"And my heart nearly threw me in her fright," Alice's face had paled at the recollection.

Hephzibah nodded complacently. She was thoroughly enjoying herself.

"True—true. That's just how 'tis. Animals has an instinct that ain't like to human. They sees more. Now maybe your horses just stood of a tremble, lameby like? That's how it mostly takes 'em."

Under any other circumstances the two girls would probably have laughed at the good lady's appreciation of the supposed facts. But their adventures were of too recent a date, besides they shared themselves. The gloom of the forest seemed to have got into their bones, and the hooded picture was still with them.

"The Haunted Hill," said Prudence musingly. "I don't think I ever heard in what way the valley was haunted. Have you, mother?"

"Sakes alive, girl, yes. It's the way you have said

with fantastic fixin's added accordin' to taste. That 'low it come I never believed. Folks disagreed about the spooks. They all allowed as the place was haunted, but their notions wasn't just alike. Your poor father, child, was a man o' sense an' he argued as plain as a tie-post. He said there was falsifications around that valley 'cause of the varying yarns, and I wouldn't go away here. But as Sarah says, when the washing don't dry white there's mostly a prairie fire somewhere an' und. Your father was that set on his point that he wouldn't never go an' see for himself, although, I do say, I urged him to it for the sake of truth."

Prudence yawned significantly and Alice had snuggled down on to her pillow. The former clattered in beneath the clothes.

"Well, mother, all I can say is that never again, unless I am forced to, will I visit Owl Hoot. And under any circumstances I will never run the risk of getting brought ill there."

"Well, well," said the farm-wife, rising heavily to her feet and preparing to depart, "maybe for ye would like to hear about the thing you've seen when he comes back. She paused on her way to the door and turned an earnest face upon the two girls. "Say, children, you didn't see no blue lights, did ye?"

"No, mother Hephzy," said Alice sleepily. "There were no blue lights."

"Ah" in a tone of relief. "There's no guineaving the blue lights. They're bad. It means death, children, death does the blue light—sure." And the good lady passed out of the room with the shuffling gait which a pair of loose, berless slippers contrived to percolate.

"True," said Alice when the door had closed, "what are you going to ask Holb to come?"

"As soon as possible, if you like."

"Thanks. Good night, dear; mother Hephzy is a sweet old thing."

The two girls turned over, and in a few moments were sleeping soundly. It would have taken more than the recollections of their adventures to banish sleep from their tired eyes. They slept the sweet refreshing sleep of those who have passed their waking hours in the strong bracing air of the prairie.

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Two days later Hervey was abroad early. He was cleaning his guns outside the back door of the house. Two weapons were lying upon a large dust sheet which was spread out upon the ground. The guns were in pieces, and each portion had been carefully oiled and wiped. He was now devoting his attention to a heavy revolver.

Prudence was standing in the kitchen doorway watching her brother. Andy was over by the barn, superintending the dispatch of the teams to the harvest fields, the hands were preparing to depart to their work. Prudence's early morning work was in the creamery.

Hervey looked up from the weapon he was cleaning and turned his great eyes upon his sister.

"When is this fellow coming out here?" he asked in a tone of irritation. His question was merely the result of his own train of thought. He had not been speaking of any one in particular.

"Who? Robb Chillingwood?"

"Yes, of course. I've not heard of any one else's coming."

"We've asked him for a fortnight to-day. Why?"

Hervey ran the cleaning-rod through a couple of the chambers of the pistol before he spoke again. The rag jammed in the barrel and entailed a hard pull to extract it.

"Who asked him to come?" he went on, as he readjusted the piece of rag in the eye of the rod.

"Mother did. It's a very nice fellow," Prudence looked over at the parade of "Shire" teams as they started for the fields. "Alice and he are engaged to be married, you know."

"And I suppose he's coming out here to 'spoon' her—ugh! It's sickening."

"Don't be so brutal," the girl replied sharply.

"Brutal?" Hervey laughed coarsely. "You're getting particular. The house won't be a fit place to live in with an engaged couple in it. I should have thought mother would have known better than to have asked him."

"Don't be absurd."

Prudence moved from her stand. The dog, Neebe, had slowly emerged from round the corner of the barn and was now moving leisurely towards her. She went over to meet him and caressed his great ugly head.

"I'm not absurd," Hervey followed her movements with no very friendly gaze. He hated with an unreasonable hatred to see her go near the dog. "I know what engaged couples are. Look at the way some of the clowns around here carry on with their girls. When Mr. Robb Chillingwood takes up his abode here, I shall depart, I tell you straight. I think mother should have consulted me first. But, there, I suppose that little vixen Aber arranged it all. I hate that hum of yours."

"There's nothing like mutual regard whatever its quality," laughed Prudence, but there was a look of anger in her deep brown eyes. "You are at liberty to please yourself as to your goings or comings—they make no difference to the work of the farm."

The girl's face was turned definitely upon her brother. Hervey spun the chambers of the pistol round. His eyes rested upon the weapon, and his forefinger pressed sharply upon the trigger. He looked thoughtfully over the fore-sight and rested the pistol in the crook of his upraised, bent left arm. His attitude was one of taking steady aim. He made no reply.

Suddenly Prudence felt the bristling of Neche's mane under her hand. As if she sought to soothe him. This dog's displays of sultry temper were as unaccommodable as they were fierce.

"What are you going to do today?" she asked, as her brother did not speak and the dog remained.

"Going over to Iredale's place. Why?"

"When shall you return?"

"Don't know." Hervey turned, his pistol was pointing towards his sister.

"Well, what about the 'thresher'? You and Andy were going to get it—— Look out!"

Her exclamation came with a shock. The great husky had dashed from her side and made a charge towards its master. Its legs were drawn up, and its fearful, bared fangs gleamed in the morning light. Hervey lowered his weapon with a laugh. The dog paused irresolute, then, with a wicked growl, it turned back and sought again the girl's caressing hand.

"One of these days I'll give you something to snarl at, you d——d cur," Hervey said between his clenched teeth.

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Then he turned at the sound of his mother's voice. The old lady was standing in the kitchen doorway.

"What's all the fuss about?" she asked, turning her round eyes from one to the other. "Arriving again. I'll be bound. Breakfast ready, so just come in, both of you, or the 'slap jacks' 'll all be spoiled."

Prudence glanced covertly in the dog's direction as she obeyed the summons. She was afraid that the brute contemplated a further attack upon its master. In spite of the constant bickerings which took place between these two, the girl had no desire that her brother should be hurt.

Hervey spoke not a word during the morning meal, except to demand the food he required, and his mother had a damping effect on the meal. But it was with a sigh of relief that his mother at last rose from the table and began to gather the plates preparatory to clearing away. Once, as Hervey moved about the table the dog to return to his grins she looked as though she were going to speak. But the words died on her lips and she retired off to the wash-house without speaking.

The atmosphere of the house. Hervey mounted his horse and rode off. His mother looked after him, sighed and shrugged, then she went on with her work with a touch of her old cheerful manner about her. No complaint ever passed her lips, but to those who knew the kindly old face the change that had come over it was very apparent. The smooth forehead was creased and deep with wrinkles which were new to it and the eyes had lost something of their expression of placid content.

But Hervey travelled his own road at his own gait. His thoughts he kept to himself. The man was more or less inscrutable to those about him.

To-day he had taken his dog with him. He had at length made up his mind to rid himself of the brute. The exhibition of that morning had decided him upon a course which he had long meditated, but had always failed to carry out when the critical moment arrived.

The hound limped along beside its master's horse as they plunged into the deep woods of the Owl Hill Valley. Now did he show the least sign of a thing to wonder from "heel." He followed on the beaten track of olden days

keeping pace with the horses in spite of the fact of only possessing three legs.

Arrived at the river, the grey handed over his horse to Ching and proceeded to the mountain first. To-day he meant to visit the mountain region. The valley beyond the Hunter II had been almost empty by him, now he was intent upon the hills on the south. Across to this region was crossed by the one other practical route from the valley, namely the Hunter II, and then by leaving away to the right. He traversed the steep slopes of the hill and soon came to the narrow region we had which at some point had been known by the early settlers of the district.

Here he tramped along steadily, the hoarse baying of his hounds. He walked slowly with that long bare part of a man's arm used to making great distances. He gave little heed to his surroundings so far as the location of the place were concerned. He was not the man to regard Nature's handiwork in the light of artistic effects. His great rising eyes were never still, they moved swiftly from side to side, eyes watching for the indication of game, eyes turned to the ground. It seemed as though this sport was as the breath of life to him. Now and again his gaze would turn upon the hound behind him and as these moments the movement was quickly the result of mere sudden, dominant thought and had nothing to do with the sport. As a watchful man who makes him seek to discover in the sleeping world of game beneath restraint of the presence of game there is suggested by the human being.

About a third of the way along the road after rounding an abrupt bend suddenly appeared out on to the grassy clearing. It was the first time in Herve's many wanderings in these regions that he had actually come across the course little creature. For a moment as he gazed upon it he hardly realised what it was. Then as he joined the crowd he felt in the middle the sudden feeling broken and landed about the place and the anxious and easily changing scenes and the various shaped walls of stone on which marked the graves he remembered the words of his sister and her friend had said and, advancing, he bent upon one of the three posts and looked about him curiously.

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He stood for some moments quite still. The place was strewn with the fragments of a wall. A great day. Hervey's eyes moved from one vagrant, scattered grave to another and unconsciously he counted them. The same graves in all were a wide stretch the long grass. Then his eyes turned from the distant hill. The wind had fallen in, and broken waters penetrated above the still standing walls of pine trees. The rising of the dunes remained, but the dunes had gone and in its place being a piece of hollowed earth. There was no small water but this had been learned over. The water was largely covered with leaves and weeds had grown out of the mud filling dashed in between the logs. There was something very delicate but distinctly present about the water.

The master's movements seemed to have been directed back to the hand for the animal's body and when he had turned moved off with the animal's body. No other movements were further, strongly so. But though Hervey's eyes now followed the dog's action it was merely the result of the attraction of the one moving object within the range of his vision and not with any purpose of his own. In fact it was not at first the animal's movements caused any movement in the watching man. The moment's slight case and the dog snuffed anxiously at the various objects which its wolfish eyes beheld.

It stretched out its neck across one grave and sniffed at the projecting arm of a wooden cross. Then it turned sharply to its little upstanding ears twitched with a motion of attention and some excitement. Then the wolf's head was turned in the direction of its master and its unobscured gaze was fixed upon his face. The animal stood thus with rare constant glancing turning this way and that listening for any sound or smell that might come upon the air. Then with a dignified movement as if pressure of ill-considered necessity it turned away to continue investigations in other directions.

The dog's show of indifference continued for a moment. In jumping towards the center but the animal stopped in the only path which was not overgrown with rank vegetation. The instant it first touched the sandy soil its head went down until its nose touched the ground.



Then followed a loud snuff. The dog's great mass lurched forward and a few great rounded snuffings upon the soil. Now Hervey's gaze instantly became one of keen interest. His thoughts each hour was dazed but warm of their result. He watched the movements of the beast with the predominant interest.

The dog moved a step or two forward. Its attitude was as though it wished to make no mistake. The snuffing came short, quick and incisive. Then the great head was raised and the snuffing continued upon the air. Now the nose turned in the direction of the bait then it turned back to the opposite direction of the path. Hervey remained motionless where he stood and his thoughts were all of wondering speculation.

Suddenly the dog turned off down the path, away from the bait. There was something very like the skittish in its attitude. Now it paused with the gaze terminated at a stone-walled grave. Here the brute's eagerness was increased to the full. Its excitement was tense. The snuffings became more frequent and tense. The bristling mane with black and white hairs quivered in its rigidity. Flattening itself in its hind feet it tore away at the earth as it crossed the stone with its huge fore paws, as though it would tear up the whole grave and lay bare the unslaking bones it contained.

Hervey encouraged the eager hound.

"Search on, be sure to find an undertone."

The dog began to "make the earth" beneath its hoarse jaws. The animal's excitement had manifested itself to its master and the man's gaze was glued tranquilly. It now moved from his position and drove over to the dog's side. He stooped down and examined the place where the dog had been working. He pushed his fingers into the hollow which the vigorous claws had made. Almost instant he drew them back sharply and a faint jural he escaped him. He straightened himself up and pushed the dog roughly away from the spot.

"Come here, you cur," he muttered. "Come over to the hut."

The dog obeyed with reluctance, and Hervey had to keep a watch upon the beast a man to lead him to his

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side. He half dragged him and half led him up the path until they reached the cave. Then with a bound the dog leapt forward and rushed in beneath the overhang which covered the doorway, giving tongue in little jerks of eagerness as he went.

Hervey was about to follow, but a strange sound beneath his feet attracted him and made him pause. He listened. The sound went on. It was very faint but quite distinct, and very like the regular fall of a hammer. He moved cautiously to the dog. A head appeared from beneath the canvas but he showed no real signs of disobedience. Instantly Hervey seized him by the mane, then released and only the animal ran and hurried to be dragged from the building. Hervey did not relax his hold until he saw the dog was a little way off the place and was once more turned from view within the depths of the woods.

For a moment, when the hound regained its freedom, it stood still and turned its head back towards the place they had just left, but a threatening roar from the man brought him to rest at once, and there was no further look. It was strange the reactions which existed between this strange assorted pair. There could be no doubt that Hervey hated the dog, and the dog's regard for its master was of doubtful quality. As a rule it would fawn in a most servile manner, but its attitude the moment its master's back was turned was always one of open and even treachery. Hervey had told his sister that the dog was as treacherous as an adder. But Hervey was not a keen observer, or he would have added, "and as wicked as a rattlesnake."

The two tramped on all day, but there was little shooting done. Hervey also seemed to have utterly forgotten his intention to shoot the dog. Time after time jack rabbits got up and dashed off into the woods, but there fell no report of the gun. Prairie chickens in the open fields whirled up from the long grass, but Hervey paid no heed, and when several deer trotted across the open path, and the gun remained locked under his arm, it plainly showed the preoccupied state of his mind.

The truth was that Hervey was thinking with a profundity that imposed something which must very nearly

affect his personal interests. And these personal interests, at the moment, consisted in George Brown and the graveyard. He had discovered the story the girls had told as he would discover nothing which pertained to the supernatural. But now he had learned something which put an entirely different meaning to the adventure the toad was had in. It is easy enough to satisfy the most human mind, but dog instincts are purely practical, and as Henry Brown's glands do not leave a hot print, neither did his upon a hot stone. At first the man had been puzzled as to what that meant was. Graveyards are the places are places favoured by the hungry one, and he had been inclined to suppose that such was the trail which the dog had discovered. But his own investigations had suggested something different.

The grave which standing half-buried so furiously was an ordinary grave, for in the way he had laid into the hole the dog had made at the edge, he had found that beneath the stone was a cavity. Then had come the recollection of the faint soundings he had distinctly heard beneath the ground. And instantly the story the girls had told seemed a human aspect. Without hesitating he had hurried to the place, had not even stopped wondering in passing through the mysterious graveyard, but had seen human things. What, he asked himself, was the meaning of it? What strange compulsion was George following in this dark valley? Where was Frederick now? Where did he go to when he moved out of the district on business, and what was the nature of the business? To Henry it was a great step from questions of this sort to a general answer. And when he resumed the meditation, the secret slowly showed the uncertainty of the district to cattle-raising and the great wealth of the valley all made since his coming to the country it was no difficult task for his thoughts to suggest some fabulous undertaking. But the one question to which he could find no equally likely reply was that which asked the nature of the things which were to go on at night in the shadow of those dense forests.

He turned on freedom of the passing time. His discovery had turned him to a point of excitement which swayed his thoughts in the direction they would naturally

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inquire. In what manner could he turn his dogs over to account? If a score of persons on horseback surrounded his stand. He stood at almost arm's length from the men and the graveyard and if it was as he believed, some "revived" dealings upon which Lorde's was engaged, the rest would be easy. All he wanted was money and the owner of Lorde's Ranch had plenty and to spare.

The sun was quite low over the horizon when he at length turned his steps again in the direction of his ranch. He was hungry; he had eaten nothing since breakfast.

Hervey was not there, as he had expected by any sample with regard to the hunt, and the owner of Lorde's Ranch. He partook of the supper which Chute had prepared for him without the slightest reservation. And when it was finished he sat there away smoking one of Lorde's best cigars with the utmost enjoyment. He watched the shadows grow and deepen. He waited until the blue vault of the sky had changed its hue to the indistinguishable shadow which flows in the wake of the daylight and the spark of fire came forth to stage out upon its surface. Then he called for his horse and set out ostensibly for Leon Dyke.

He rode away down the valley until he was clear of the woods, then leaving the granite trail he turned away to the right and descending a wide, smooth, grassy descent into the woods again, taking a course which led to the eastward, parallel to the trunk of the creek. Now he quickened his pace and tightened his long, lank body at his horse's heels, and finally in his way of riding. Now did he draw rein until he reached a well known place which lacked the graveyard hill. Here, however, he dismounted, and secured his horse to a tree. Then he removed the reins from his horse's mouth and proceeded to secure the hound in an adjacent position. The night had quite closed in and the darkness of the woods was profound when he started to make his way up the side of the hill in the direction of the graveyard.

Hervey paused for nothing. His mind was clearly made up. Whatever obstacles may have been, his there was none to be feared in his art and now. He was ahead of him the possibility of furthering his own interests, and he revolved in the thought of George Lorde's wealth.

The despicable methods he was adopting troubled him not in the least. He could pay dearly if his work partook of the nature of crime.

Hervey entertained no friendship for any one. The greed of gold was his ruling passion. He cared nothing from whom it was obtained or by what means. If things were so he believed them to be, that was this a truly golden opportunity. And he would bleed Ireland to the very limits of his resources.

He reached the outskirts of the clearing, but he did not leave the darkness of the forest. The darkness saved him for a hiding place from which he could obtain a perfect view of the nightly encampment. The tumbling hut and the weary men, groined with their crowding movements to do nothing in the starlight. And he settled himself for a long vigil.

He bent forward without result. It was weary work, this waiting. He dared not move about for at every movement of his feet the rustling of the falling vegetation crunched and revealed that in the profundity of silence. The man's patience, however weak, he during under such circumstances. He told himself that the result would more than recompense him for the trouble. He had everything to gain, and the task appeared to him. Two hours passed, and still not a sound to be the useful silence. Then came the first sign. Suddenly a bright light shone out down in the valley in the direction where he late a hour stood. It gleamed faintly, almost red in its depth of yellow. Hervey held his breath so deep was his excitement and the feeling of anticipation.

The sudden appearance of the light was the signal for further destruction. The prolonged wailing of an owl seemed to it. The wailing, or shriek and one piercing gave the war her such a nerve-racking moment as to almost urge him to leap a half mile out. But the cry died away, and as the darkness grew fainter and eventually became a rest he recovered himself. A moment passed and another cry upon the air, this time it came from near as the valley as the opposite height. Hervey stood with ears straining. He had detected it with his ears in the midst of these cries. Then as the sound faded away a single word muttered below his breath voiced his discovery.

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"Homen!" he said to himself, and a feeling of unbelieveable suspense over him, and he drew a puff of air in his jacket, and the hand groped its way to the door.

His eyes were still turned in the direction of the house, where the light was burning when a sweeping noise suddenly drew his attention to the graveyard before him. The sweeping noise was, and sounded like the grinding of an axe upon a whetstone. It distinctly came from one of the graves, and for a moment, he experienced a shudder of superstitious fear. The next moment he suppressed a shudder as he realized that the sound came from the grave at the side of which he had made such a demonstration that morning. He gazed in the direction, his great eyes burning with the fire of pent-up excitement and speculation. What was the secret he was about to learn? He longed to draw closer to the spot, but he knew that he dared not move.

Suddenly a vague shadow loomed up from amongst the grass which grew so rankly in the cemetery. It was of a rose, black even against the dark, round of utter darkness in which the forest was bared. Hervey leaned forward, his eyes straining and eyes were tense drawn. What was this—thing?

The shadow paused. Then it rose higher. It seemed to suddenly straighten up, and Hervey perceived a deep breath to escape him. The black figure had assumed the shape of a man, and the form moved forward toward the big dead house. Then the walking man saw that other figures were following the first in rapid succession. Each figure was tearing its way down. Some seemed to be carrying bundles, some carried that which appeared to be boxes, and others carried small square packages. As Hervey's eyes became used to the strange scene he was able to distinguish something of the features of these denizens of the grave. He noted the long dark, smock-shaped garment each figure wore, and, after a while, in the starlight he was able to note that most of them wore on their heads little skull caps. Then a mutter and exclamation broke from his lips, and in his tone was a world of satisfaction.

"Homen!" he whispered. Then "Traffic in yellow, by all that's holy!"

## CHAPTER XII

### THE BREAKING OF THE STORM

THE FIRST of January Blanch was seated before the table in his pretentious sitting room. Before him were piled a number of open account books, and books containing matters relating to the business of his ranch.

He was not looking at them now, but sat gazing at the blank wall in front of him with thoughtful, introspective eyes. His chin was resting upon his clenched hands, and his elbows were propped upon the table. He was sitting with his shirt-sleeves rolled up above his elbows, for the day was hot and the air was close and heavy. On one hand the window was wide open, but no jarring sounds came in to disturb the thinker. The door on the other side was also open wide. George Ireddale showed no desire for secrecy. His attitude was that of a man who feels himself to be perfectly safeguarded against any sort of surprise. Thus he sat in the quiet of the oppressive heat thinking of many things which chiefly concerned his life in the valley of Owl Hoot.

He had been going over the accounts which represented his fifteen years of labour in that quiet corner of the great Dominion, and the perusal had given him a world of satisfaction. Fifteen years ago he had first settled in the valley. He had acquired the land for a mere song for no one would look at the region of Owl Hoot as a district suitable either for stock raising or for the cultivation of grain. But he had seen possibilities in the place—possibilities which had since been realized even beyond his expectations. His sense of humour was tickled as he thought of the cattle he had first brought to the ranch—a herd of old cows which he had picked up cheap somewhere out West at the foot of the Rockies.

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He almost laughed aloud as he thought of the way in which he had fostered and added to the wild stupid legends of the place, and how he had never failed to make the undesirability of his neighbourhood for any sort of agriculture. And thus for fifteen years he had kept the surrounding country clear of all positive settlers. Life had been very pleasant, quiet, untroubled, and profitable for him, and as he thought of it all, his eyes drooped again to his books before him, and he gazed upon a sea of entries in a long, thick, narrow volume which bore on the cover the legend—

### OPIMUM

Yea, he never attempted to disguise from himself the nature of his calling. He placed no further hindrance to his trade with the k coastings of white wash. He knew what he was, and faced the offensive with perfect equanimity. He was a smuggler, probably the largest operator in the illicit traffic of opium smuggling, and the most successful importer of Chinese along the whole extent of the American border. He knew that the penitentiary was yearning for him, and he knew that every moment of his life was shadowed by the threat of penal servitude. And in the meantime he was storing up his wealth, not in dribblets, dependent upon the seasons for their extent, but in huge sums which were proportionate to the risks he was prepared to run.

And his risks had been many, and his escapes narrow and frequent. But he had hitherto evaded the law, and now the time had come when he intended to throw it all up—to blot out at one sweep the traces of those fifteen prosperous years, and settle down to enjoy the proceeds of his toil.

It was only after much thought and after months of deliberation that he had arrived at this decision. For this man revelled in his calling with an enthusiasm which was worthy of an honest object. It was not a man whose natural inclinations lent themselves to law-breaking, far from it. Outside of his trade he lived a cleaner life than many a so-called law-abiding citizen. The risks he ran, the excitement of contraband trade, and a fatal fascination which was as the breath of life to him, a



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fascination which, with all his strength of mind in every other direction, he was powerless to resist as were the commonest people to the fascinations of the drug he parveyed.

If it was he stood face to face with a contingency he had never taken into his considerations. He had fallen a victim to man agencies, to a woman, and he had been forced to a choice between the two things. Either he must renounce all the joys of Princeton Mallory, or he must marry her and break from all his old associations. To a man of lonely disposition the two things were incompatible. The steady growth of his love for this girl, a love which almost all that was best in his deep, strong nature, all his nobility in the balance, and, reluctantly though the matter of Lonely Ranch was to ever turn itself from the future which had attracted him so much wealth and so many years of real living moments, his decision had been made with calm deliberation, the hat had gone to the Illinois, for the traffic in yellow would know him no more.

He came from his seat, and crossing the room stood gazing out of the open window. Finally his eyes were turned up towards the heavy banking of storm-clouds which hovered low over the valley.

Already the greater portion of his plans had been carefully laid. They had been costly for many reasons. The agents were men who required to be dealt with liberally. However, everything had been satisfactorily settled. Now only remained the disposal of the ranch. This was rather a delicate matter for obvious reasons. He wished to effectually obliterate all traces of the traffic he had carried on there.

He went back to the table and picked up an official-looking letter. It was a communication from Robb (the groom), written on the municipal note paper of Ainsley.

He read the letter carefully through.

"MY DEAR MR. IREDALE,

"There is a man named Gordon D. Field stopping at the hotel here who has lately arrived from Scotland. I have effected the sale of the Dommon Ranch—you

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know, the German Greg's, old place to him. He is a man of considerable means, and is going in largely for stock raising. He has commissioned me to buy something like five thousand head of cows and two-year-old steers for him. His wish is to be right out with him. You will understand the difficulty I shall have in obtaining such a bunch of suitable animals, and I thought you might have some surplus stock that you wish to dispose of at a reasonable price. You might let me know by return if such is the case, always bearing in mind when you make your quotations that the gentleman hails from old Scotia. There is shortly to be a great boom in emigration from both the old country and the States, and I am now combining the business of land agent with my other duties, and I find it a pressing concern. Let me now about the cattle at your earliest convenient time.

"Yours truly,

"ROSE CHILWORTH."

Iredale smiled as he read the letter over.

"Come at an opportune moment," he said to himself. "Surplus stock, eh? Well, I think I can offer him all the stock he needs at a price which will meet with the approval of even a canny Scot. I'll write him at once."

He seated himself at his table and wrote a long letter asking Chilworth to come out and see him and at the same time, offering to dispose of the stock of Laramie Ranch. He sealed the letter, and then returned his account books to their hiding place behind the bunkcase. Then he went to the door and summoned his head man.

In spite of the habit of years, Iredale was not without a strong sense of relief as he reviewed the progress of the disestablishment of the ranch. He remembered how narrowly he had escaped from Leslie Grey less than a year ago, and now that he had begun to burn his boats he was eager to get through with the process.

The ferret-faced Chint framed himself in the doorway.

"My horse!" demanded his master. "And Chint, what you to take this letter to Lakeville and post it with your own hands. You understand?"

The little man nodded his head.

"Good!" Iredale paused thoughtfully. "Chint,"

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we went on a . . . later " we've finished with opium. We return into private life from now on, you and I. We are going to leave Our Home. How does that suit you?"

The little man cheerfully assented, and twisted his face in a squinting grimace intended for a pleasant smile. Then his eyebrows went up inquiringly. Leslie took his meaning at once.

"I don't know where we are going as yet. But you'll go with me. I want you to remain my 'head man.'"

Chinto assented. There could be no doubt from his expression that he was devoted to his master.

"Right. Send my horses round at once. I am going to Louis Dike and shall be back for supper."

The messenger departed and the rancher prepared for his ride.

When the large fireball set out for Louis Dike the rain was anticipated in the gloom of evening storm. But he knew the peculiarities of the climate too well to be alarmed. The storm he judged would not break until nearly sundown, and then it would only be short and sharp. In the meantime he would have reached the farm. There was a curious, unconscious quality in his way of settling his affairs. It was as though some strange power were urging him to haste. This may have been the result of the man's character, for he was of a strangely vigorous nature. He had put the matter very in motion, and now he pressed it with the cool and eager desire to see the work swiftly carried out.

As his horse galloped over the prairie he took the direct route of the evening light. His thoughts centered upon the object of his visit. He saw nothing of the pleasant fields and pastures through which his journey took him. The threat of coming storm was nothing to him. For all he had he paid to it the sky might have been of a tropical blue. The ruffling prairie chickens rose lazily in their coveys, with their crops well filled with the gleanings of the harvested wheat fields, but he scarcely even saw them. All he saw was the sweet dark face of the girl to whom he intended to put the question which was most sure to bring whether it be put by the man of their choice or by some one for whom they cared not a cent. He had always longed for this day to come, but, until now, had never seen how such could ever dawn.

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for him. It had to be a great sacrifice to sever himself from the past, but he did so, and once again his heart was filled with thankfulness, and never had he felt so free from care as now. He realized all that a lover may realize of his own unworthiness, but he allowed himself no extravagance of thought in this direction. Prudence was a good woman, he knew, and he intended, if Fate so willed, to devote the rest of his life to her happiness. As he drew near to his destination his heart beat a shade faster and doubt began to assail him. He found himself speculating upon his chances of success. He believed that the daughter of Hephzibah May regarded him with favour, but nothing had gone before to give him any clue to her maiden feelings. He wavered doubtfully, and, in proportion, his nervousness increased.

Out upon the trail, at a distance, he saw a horseman riding away from the farm; he did not even trouble about the rider's identity. The strong, reckless nature concealed beneath his quiet exterior, urged him on to learn his fate. Nothing mattered to him now but his sentence as pronounced by the child of the prairie whom love he sought.

There were three occupants of the sitting room at the farm. Prudence and Alice, when were at the table, which was covered by a litter of lined dress material and paper patterns. Prudence was struggling with a mass of shirt fronts, under which a sewing machine was almost buried. Alice was cutting and pinning and basting seams at the other end of the table. Sarah Curridge was standing beside the open window watching the rising of the storm.

Conversation came spasmodically. The girls were intent upon their work.

"It is all very well to have new dresses," said Prudence, with an impatient tug at the material on which the machine was perching, "but I'm afraid half the pleasure of them is absorbed by the process of 'making.' Oh, these endless seams! And I don't believe a single one of them is straight. I feel quite hepless."

"Cheer up, Prue," said Alice, without looking up. She herself was endeavoring to set a wristband pattern upon a piece of stuff so that she could get the two bands out of barely enough cloth for one. "You should see

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more dash when working a machine. When you are turning it, imagine you are driving a 'through mail' to the east and have to make up time. The seams will come all right."

"Yes, and break cotton and needles, and—and land the engine over the side of a cut bark, or run down a gang of plate layers or something. There now I've run clean off the cloth. I wish you wouldn't talk so much."

The two girls laughed whilst they joined efforts in righting the catastrophe.

"Isn't it getting dark?" said Alice, when Prudence had once more settled to work.

Sarah spoke without turning from the window.

"The storm's banking, child. The lightning is already flashing over Owl Hoot way. Hervey will only just escape it."

"What did he want to go over to the ranch for?" asked Prudence. "He never seems to go anywhere else now. I should think Mr. Fredale will get sick of having him always round."

"My dear," observed Sarah, with unction, "when two men enjoy destroying the harmless life which the good God has set upon the prairie, they never tire of one another's society. It is who would disdain to black a pair of boots would not hesitate to crawl about in the mud and damp reeds of a swamp at daybreak to slaughter a few innocent ducks. There is a bond amongst sportsmen which is stronger than all the vows made at any altar. Hervey's delight in destroying life is almost human. I trust he never shoots sitting game."

"I should hope not," said Prudence. "I would never own him as a brother if he did. Hello, Neche," as the door was pushed slowly open and the great husky limped heavily into the room. The animal looked round him in a dignified, unblinking way, and then came over to Prudence's side and leisurely curled himself up on the skirt of her dress. "Say, old boy," she added, looking down at the recumbent form, "if mother comes in and finds you here you'll leave the room hurriedly."

Alice laid her scissors down and looked over at her friend.

"Hervey seems quieter than ever lately. He won't even take the trouble to quarrel."

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"And a good thing too," said Prudence shortly.

Sarah turned and surveyed the two girls for a moment; an amused expression was in her dreamy eyes. Then she turned back to the window as the first distant growl of the coming storm made itself heard.

"Harvey only quarrels when his mind is in a state of stagnation. The mind of a man is very like a pool of water. Let it stand, and it corrodes with matter which throws off offensive odours. The longer it stands the worse state it gets into. Set the water in motion, turn it into a running stream, and it at once cleanses itself. Harvey's mind has been lately set in motion. I have noticed the change."

"He has certainly become less offensive of late," said Alice. "I wonder what has changed him."

"Food for mental occupation," said Sarah.

"A life monotonous, unrelieved, bridle itself discontent, leading a mind to lofty thoughts for which by nature meant."

Prudence brought the machine to a standstill, and, propping one elbow upon the table, rested her chin upon her hand.

"I believe you are right, Aunt Sarah," she said slowly. "Harvey's certainly found something which has set him thinking. I rather fancy I know—or can guess—what it is that has roused him."

The old lady turned from the window and gazed curiously at her pupil. She was keenly interested. The recreation of her life was the observation of her kind. Her logic and philosophy may not always have been sound, but she never failed to arrive somewhere in the region of the truth. The recent change in Harvey had puzzled her.

"He asked me yesterday to let him see that notice in the *Free Press* which appeared when Leslie was murdered," Prudence went on. "He also asked me what Leslie's dying words were. He insisted on the exact words."

"The storm will break soon," observed Sarah. She had turned away to the window.

"I wonder," said Alice; "perhaps he has discovered —" She broke off meaningly.

"That's what I think," said Prudence.

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Sarah shook her head, but what she meant to convey was uncertain, for she had her back turned and she said nothing at the moment. Prudence restarted her machine and Alice reluctantly bent over her patterns. Sarah moved back from the window. She saw a horseman galloping over the prairie in the direction of the house. She had recognized Iredale.

"Girls," she said, her soft eyes turning on Prudence's bent head, "I really think some one should be helping the mother. This is baking day." Prudence looked up with an expression of consternation. "Now no, not you, child. You stay here and get on with your sandalries and dressmaking. I'll go and help her."

Without waiting for a reply she darted off. She had no intention of having her innocent little scheme upset. The moment after her departure the clatter of horse's hoofs came in through the open window. Alice, looking up, saw Iredale dismounting from his horse. She jumped up to go to the front door.

"Here's Mr. Iredale!" she exclaimed. Then, "So he's returned home. I'm so glad. One scarcely knows the place without him."

She dashed out to meet him, and, a moment later, returned ushering him in.

"Mr. George Iredale," she announced, with mock ceremony. Then she stood aside to allow him to pass, bowing low as he entered the room. She stood for a moment staring upon the burly figure. She noted how the plain features lit up at the sight of the girl bending over the sewing-machine. Then she gave herself an obvious cue.

"I'll go and call mother Hephzy," she said, and retreated hastily to the bake-house.

Iredale moved over to where Prudence was sitting. She had ceased work to greet him, but she did not rise from the table. Neither surveyed the intruder, granted and closed his eyes again. Prudence was half inclined to resent Alice's sudden departure. Alice was in her confidence, she knew her feelings as regarded George Iredale. She considered her friend's action was unkind.

"You mustn't let me disturb you, Prudence," Iredale said in his low, pleasant voice. "What is this?"—fingering the new material—"a new fall dress? Wonderful how

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you can cope with the intricacies of the manufacture of such things. It would be a very sorry day for me if I were left to cut my own coats." He laughed nervously.

Prudence detected an unusual agitation in his voice, and something warned her that this man had come over that afternoon to see her alone. She joined in the laugh, but his eyes remained quite serious.

"When did you come back from town?" she asked, after a pause.

"I haven't been to town. I've been across the border. My business took me into Minnesota."

"Oh, I thought you had been to Winnipeg." She stopped and caressed the great dog at her feet.

Instinct shook his head. A vivid light of lightning shot across the open window, and a crash of thunder followed it immediately. The storm was breaking at last.

"I'll close the window," he said, and it opened the room to do so. Prudence looked after him. When he returned he sat himself in Anne's chair, having brought it nearer to the machine. Then followed a long silence while the machine rattled down a seam. The man watched the nimble fingers, gently as they guided the material under the needle. The bent head presented him a more than the barest outline of the girl's cheek, but he seemed content. Now that the moment had arrived for him to speak, he was quite content of himself.

"Prudence," he began at last, "I am giving up my ranch. I have been making the necessary arrangements. I have done with money-making."

"Really?" The girl looked up sharply, then down again at her work. She had encountered the steady gaze of the man's earnest eyes. "Are you going now to leave me?" She was conscious of the lameness of her question.

"I don't quite know. That depends largely upon circumstances. I am certainly about to seek pleasant places, but I cannot tell yet where those pleasant places will be found. Perhaps you will help me."

"How?" The seam swerved out into a gnat box, and Prudence was forced to go back over it.

"Easily enough, if you will."

The girl did not answer, but buried herself with the manipulation of her machine. Her face had paled, and



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her heart was thumping in great pulsations. Fredie went on. He had assumed his characteristic composure. What fire burned beneath his calm exterior it would have needed the keen eagle eyes of Sarah to judge to detect, for beyond the occasional flashing of his great grey eyes, there was little or no outward sign.

"I have known you for a good many years, child, years which have helped to put a few grey hairs on my head, it is true, but still years which have taught me something which I never dreamed of learning out here on the prairie. They have taught me that such a thing as love exists for every man on this earth, and that somewhere in this world there is a woman who can inspire him with feelings which make the pettinesses of his own nature almost seem very small indeed. I have learned that man was not made to live alone, but that a certain woman is destined to be with him, so that life is an utterly worthless thing. I have learned that there is but one woman in the world who can do in me the better of those aspirations of man, and that woman is your Prudence."

The girl had ceased to work, and was staring straight in front of her out of the window, where the wind and rain were now flashing furiously. As Fredie pronounced the last words she shook her head slowly, almost helplessly. The man had leaned forward in his chair, and his elbows rested on his parted knees, and his hands were tightly clasped.

"Don't shake your head, dear," he went on, with persuasive earnestness. "If you are not first, and then you shall give me your decision. I know I am much older than you, but surely that disparity need not stand in our way. I dare say I have many more years of life yet left than lots of younger men. Besides, I am rich—very rich. With me you can live the life you choose. If you wish to stay here on the prairie, why, you shall have the most perfect farm that money can buy. If, on the other hand, you choose to see the world, you only have to say the word. Prudence, I know I am not a very attractive man. I have little to recommend me, and my life has not always been spent as perhaps it should have been—but I love you very dearly, and my future shall be devoted to your happiness. Will you be my wife?"

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There was a deafening crash of thunder which seemed to come from directly overhead. The dog started up with a growl. Then he stood looking up into the girl's face. The dying reverberations slowly faded away and left the room in deathly silence. The nervous light in the girl's eyes was converted by the deadly set of her mouth. She kept her face studiously turned from Fredale who, observing with all the intuition of a man in deadly earnest, read in her expression something of what his answer was to be.

"Can you not do you not care for me sufficiently?"

The words contained such a world of appeal that Prudence felt herself forced to turn in his direction. She now looked squarely into his eyes, nor was there the faintest suspicion of embarrassment in her manner. The moment had come when she must choose between herself and her self-imposed duty. She knew that she loved Fredale, but she checked herself, which checked very like a sigh. She had listened to the precepts of Sarah Larnidge all her life and in consequence she had learned to regard her duty before all things. She now conceived she had a great duty to perform. She felt helpless, so feeble in the matter, but the voice of conscience held her to her mistaken course.

"I believe I love you, I am sure I care for you very very much, but——"

"Then you will marry me." The man reached out to take her hand but she drew it back. His eager eyes shone in the stormy darkness in which the room was bathed.

She shook her head.

"When Leslie Lacy was murdered I made a vow that I would not rest until the murderer was brought to justice. My vow is unfulfilled. I could not marry you and be happy while this is so. Do you know what marriage with you would mean? Surely that I should make no effort to fulfil my vow to the dead. I cannot marry you now."

Fredale was staggered by the awful wrong-mindedness under which he considered she was labouring. For a moment he could scarcely find words to express himself.

"But—but surely child, you are not going to let this phantom of duty come between us?" Oh, you can never

do such a thing! Besides, we would work together; we would not leave a stone unturned to discover the wretch who did him to death——"

He broke off. Prudence answered swiftly, and the set of her face seemed to grow harder as she felt the difficulty of abiding by her resolve.

"There is no phantom of duty, George. It is very much a reality. I cannot marry you until——until——"

Iredale was smiling now. The shock of the girl's strange decision had passed. He saw something of the motive underlying it. Her sense of duty seemed to have warped her judgment, and, with quiet firmness, he meant to set it aside.

"And this is the only reason for refusing me?" he asked. He had become serious again, he seemed merely to be seeking assurance.

"Yes. Oh, George, can't you see how it is?" She gazed appealingly into his face. And the man had to keep a very tight hold upon his feelings.

"I am afraid I am a little dense, child," he said gravely.

"I must make you understand," Prudence went on with nervous haste. Her conscience urged her forward, whilst her love prompted her to set aside all recollection of the dead and to bask in the love this man offered her. She was a simple womanly soul, trying with all the strength of her honest purpose to resist the dictates of her love, and to do that which seemed right in her own eyes. The task she had set herself had seemed easy when she had spoken of it to Alice, but now in the face of this man's love, in the face of her own self-realization, it seemed beyond her strength. Listen to me, and you will see for yourself that I must not marry you: yet, I believed that I loved Leslie Grey truly, fondly. As I look back now I am sure I did. I was never happy but when I was with him. He seemed so strong and resolute. I never had a moment in which to doubt myself. Then, when he died, the agony I suffered was something too great to contemplate. As he lay on the little bed with his life ebbing, and I watched him dying by inches, I was filled with such horror and despair that I thought surely I should go mad. Then it dawned

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on me that he had been murdered, and my anguish turned to a dreadful feeling of rage and longing to avenge him. Never in my life did I experience such terrible passion as at that moment. I believe at the time I really was mad. The one thought in my mind was, "Who—who has done this thing?" Then Leslie died, and in his death agony he spoke and told me, as well as to a poor gasping faculty, what had happened. His words were unintelligible to every one except me. And those words form a clue to the assassin's identity. By his bedside I swore to avenge him. Never would I rest until my oath was carried out. As you know, after that I became ill and went away. And, oh, the shame of it, during those months of rest and illness I forgot Leslie Grey, I forgot my vow. I forgot everything that claimed my duty. Think for the shame the shallow heartlessness, the feeble story which is mine. I, who had loved him as I believed no girl had ever loved, had forgotten him as though he had never come into my life."

Iris suddenly comprehended why the girl paused.

"Then you came into my life," Prudence went on. Her face was turned towards the window, and a new outbreak of which she saw the tongues of lightning playing across the sky. "Time went on and I grew slowly creeping into my heart which made me feel my shortcoming. Gradually my conduct was revealed to me in its true colours, and I saw myself as I really was, a heartless, worthless creature, so despicable even to myself as to make me shudder when I contemplated the future. Let me be honest now, at least. I knew that I loved you, George, that is," bitterly, "as far as I was capable of love, but what sort of affection was mine to give to anybody? I could not trust myself. I trusted myself. My conscience cried out, 'I have betrayed.' Faith still remained. My vow was still fulfilled. Knowing this, how could I believe in this new love which had come to me? No, I could not. And it was then that I saw what I must do. Before I could ever dream of love I must redeem the pledge I made at Leslie's deathbed. That alone could restore my faith in myself. I saw that it is almost impossible to convey to you all that I

have thought upon the matter, but, believe me, I can never marry while Leube remains unavenged.

Truie stood in the girl's eyes as she looked up her curiously twisted self-accusations. And the sincerity of her words was not to be doubted for a moment. Iredale had listened wondering, and he marvelled to himself at the wealth of perspective in a woman's mind.

"And you are prepared to undertake the matter—alone?"

"If this is helping me—it costs money."

"Just so. But would not a man's help be of greater importance than your mother's? Don't you think that your husband's assistance might help you far more? That it might be able to lighten the burden of this self-imposed task?" "It, tut, child. Because of your vow it should not deter you from marriage, especially when your husband is not only ready but most willing to assist you in clearing up the mystery, and avenging Leube's Grief. As regards the quality—"

"of your regard, well, either you love me little girl, on your own confession, and if you have no graver scruples than you have offered, then you must marry me."

Iredale went forward and took the girl's two hands in his. This time she made no resistance. She allowed them to rest in his broad palms, and, in spite of all her protests, felt ineffably happy.

At last she drew them away and shook her head weakly.

"No, it is no good, George. You must not be burdened with my undertaking. I cannot consent to such a thing. It is only your generosity and kindness which make you look at the matter so lightly. You would regret your decision later on, and then—"

"No mother and I will see the matter through. We have already secured the services of the smartest detective in Winnipeg, and he is working upon the only clue we possess."

"But I must," said Iredale, with a smile which made his plain features almost handsome. "And Truie I am going to tell your mother that you have engaged yourself to me, and that I am a new recruit, fortune as well as the work. No—holding up his hand as the girl was about to protest again—"no objections, sweetheart. And, before we go further, tell me of this clue."

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Prudence smiled happily. She had done her duty, she had laid bare her heart to this man. She had spared herself in no way. She had let him see she told herself, the sort of girl she was. He still cared for her, he still wished to marry her. She bowed her mind to his quiet decision.

"It is not much to go upon, but as Deane, that is the detective, says, it is a decided clue."

She rose from her seat and walked over to a small work table. At that moment the house shook to its very foundations with a dreadful crash of thunder. Neche, who had moved with her, leapt nervously at the window as though flying at some invisible enemy. The girl called him to her side. Then she stood trembling. Flash after flash of lightning blazed in the heavens, and she covered her eyes with her hands, whilst the thunder roared as though it would rend the earth from end to end. Iredale was at her side in an instant and his arm was about her, and he drew her head upon his shoulder. Instantly her nerve was restored and as the noise passed she quietly released herself. Then stooping she opened the drawer of the table and produced a torn copy of the *Winnipeg Free Press*. She held out the paper and pointed to the personal column.

"See," she said, with her index finger upon the second line of the column. "You will find 'Jump in Grey.' Those who are responsible for that message whatever it may mean, are also responsible for Leslie's death."

Iredale's eyes were fixed with a terrible fascination upon the print. A breath escaped him which sounded almost like a gasp. His hands clenched at his sides, and he stood like one turned into stone.

"How—how do you know this?" he asked, in a hoarse, hoarse voice.

"Leslie said so with his last dying breath."

There came no answering word to the girl's statement. Iredale did not move. His eyes were still upon the paper. The silence of death reigned in the room. Even the storm seemed suddenly to have ceased, only was there the incessant swish of the torrential rain outside.

"That is the clue poor Leslie gave me."

"Ah!"

"What do you think?"

"You must give me time to think."

Iredale's mouth was parched. His voice sounded strange in his own ears. For the moment he could scarcely realize his position. An overwhelming horror was upon him. Sudden ly he turned.

"What is the date of that paper?"

"A few days before Leslie's death. But this notice has appeared many times since—which will make our task the easier."

"Yes, it will make our task the easier."

Another pause, which was protracted until the silence could almost be felt. Then Prudence spoke.

"You will stay to tea?"

Iredale pulled himself together.

"No. I think not. The storm has passed, the rain is ceasing. I had better hurry back home. It will come back on us—the storm, I mean."

The girl looked out of the window.

"Yes, I think it will. Oh, I forgot to tell you Hervey went over to see you this afternoon."

Iredale's eyes turned sharply upon the girl.

"Ah, yes, I will go at once. I will call to-morrow and see Mrs. Maling. Good-bye."

He turned away and abruptly left the room. Prudence looked after him. She saw him pass out, she saw him go out by the front door and hurry down the little path which bisected the front garden. She saw him go round to the stables and he seemed not to heed the rain which was at all falling lightly. But it was not until she saw him riding away down the trail that she realized the suddenness of his departure and the fact that he hadn't even attempted to kiss her.

Iredale's horse received little consideration at its master's hands on that homeward journey. The animal was ridden almost at racing pace over the long ten miles of country. And all the way home the words the girl had spoken were running in his ears with maddening insistence—

"And when we find the author of those words we find his murderer."

She had virtually accused him of murder. For he alone was the author of those words in the paper. Truly his sins were finding him out.

## CHAPTER XIII

### BLACKMAIL

As Hervey entered the valley of the ranch he listened for the warning owl cries. To-day, however, there were none. He smiled to himself as he noted the fact, for he knew their origin, he knew their object. He well reasoned that these cries were the alarm of sentries stationed at certain points to warn those at the ranch of the approach of strangers. He knew, too, that they were used as signals for other things. And he admired the ingenuity of Iredale in thus turning the natural features of the valley to his own uses. Rain was beginning to fall in great drops, and the thunder of the rising storm had already made itself heard. He urged his horse forward.

Few men can embark on a mission of hazard or roguery without some feelings of trepidation. And Hervey was no exception to the rule. He experienced a feeling of pleasurable excitement and anticipation. There was sufficient uncertainty in his mission to make him think hard and review his powers of attack with great regard for detail. There must be no loop-hole of escape for his victim.

On the whole he was well satisfied. But he was not unprepared for failure. During his acquaintance with Iredale he had learned that the master of Lonely Ranch was not easily trifled with, neither was he the man to accept a tight situation without making a hot fight for it. It was just these things which gave Hervey the gentle qualms of excitement as he meditated upon the object of his journey. He thought of the large sums of money he had borrowed from this man, and the ease with which they had been obtained. He remembered the kindly ways and gentle manner of this reserved man, and somehow he could not get away from the thought of the velvet gloves.



But even as he thought of it he laughed. There was no getting away from the facts he possessed and if it came to anything in the shape of physical resistance well he was not unprepared. There was a comfortable feeling about the heavy jolt of the six-chambered "lawyer" in his pocket.

The valley seemed much more lonely than usual. The howling screeching of the watchful sentries would almost have been welcome to him. The forest was so dark and still. Even the falling raindrops and the deep rumbling thunder had no power to give the place any suggestion of life. There was a mournful tone over everything that caused the rider to glance about him furtively, and wish for a gleam of the prairie sunlight.

At length he drew up at the house. There was no one about. A few cattle were calmly reposing in the corral. There was not even the sharp bark of a dog to announce his arrival. As Hervey drew up he looked to see Iredale come to the door for he knew the rancher had returned from his excursions, but the front door remained shut and although the window of the sitting-room was wide open, there was no sign of any occupant within the room. He dismounted and stood thinking for a moment. Then he raised his voice and called to Chintz.

His summons was repeated before the man's ferret face appeared round a corner of the building. The little fellow advanced with no show of alacrity. Iredale had told him nothing about any expected visitor. He was not quite sure what to do.

By dint of many questions and replies, which took the form of nods and shakes of the head on the part of Chintz, Hervey learnt that Iredale had gone over to Lion Dyke, but that he would be back to supper.

"Then I'll wait for him," he said decidedly. "You can take my horse. I'll go inside."

The head man took the horse reluctantly and Hervey passed into the house.

For a long time he stood at the open window watching the storm. How it raged over the valley! The rain came down in one steady hissing deluge, and the hills echoed and re-echoed with the crashing thunder. The

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blinding lightning shot athwart the lowering sky till the nerves of the watcher fairly jumped at each successive flash. And he realized what a blessing the let-fall of rain was in that world of resinous timber. What might have been the consequences had the storm preceded the rain? Hardened as he was to such things, even Hervey shuddered to think

Wild as was the action, the waiting man's thoughts were in keeping with his surroundings, for more relentless they could not well have been. Irredale's money bags should surely be opened for him that night before he returned home. He would levy a heavy toll for his silence.

His great dark eyes, so indicative of the unrestrained nature which was his, burned with deep, cruel fires as he gazed out upon the scene. There was a profoundness, a capacity for hellishness in their expression which scarcely belonged to a sanely balanced mind. It was inconceivable that he could be of the same flesh and blood as his sister, and yet there was no doubt about it. Perhaps some unusually sagacious observer would have been less hard to convince. Hervey was bad, bad all through. Prudence was good. Sweyed by emotion the girl might have displayed some strange, hidden, unsuspected passionate depths, as witness her feelings at her dying lover's bedside. Her rage at the moment when she realized that he had been murdered was indescribable. The hysterical sweep of passion which had moved her at that moment had been capable of tragic impulse, the consequences of which one could hardly have estimated. But her nature was thoroughly good. Under some sudden stress of emotion, which for the moment upset the balance of reason, a faint resemblance to the brother might be obtained. But while Hervey's motives would be bad, hers would have for their primary cause a purpose based upon righteousness. The man needed no incentive to sway his dispositions. He had let go his hold upon the saving rock, now he floated willingly upon the tide of his evil disposition. He preferred the broad road to Hell to the narrow path of Righteousness. It may not always have been so.

The storm abated with the suddenness of its kind.

During Hervey's long wait Chints did not leave him entirely alone. Several times, on some trivial pretext, the little man visited the sitting-room. And his object was plainly to keep an eye upon his master's unbidden guest. At last there came a clatter of galloping hoofs splashing through the underlay of the forest, and presently Iredale pulled up at the door.

Hervey watched the rancher dismount. And his survey was in the nature of taking the man's moral measure. He looked at the familiar features which he had come to know so well: the easy, confident movements which usually characterized Iredale; the steady glance, the quiet undisturbed expression of his strong face. The watching man saw nothing unusual in his appearance, nothing to give him any clue, but Hervey was not a keen observer. Only the most apparent change would have been seen by him, the subtler indications of a disturbed mind were beyond his ken. Iredale seemed to be merely the Iredale he knew, and as he watched his lips part it with a sucking sound such as the gourmand might make in contemplating a succulent dish.

Iredale came in. Hervey met him at the door of the sitting room, and his greeting was cordial, even effusive.

"How are you, George? I knew you were to be back to-day. Jolly glad you've returned. Quite missed you, you know. It Jove! what a storm. What?"

"A bit; nothing to speak of. They told me at the farm you were over here."

Iredale looked quickly round the room. His survey was not lost upon his visitor. Then he went on—

"Chints looked after you? Had any refreshment? Whisky?"

"Chints looked after me! He looked in every now and then to see what I was doing." Hervey laughed unpleasantly. "Yes, I can do with a gentle 'four fingers' thanks."

Iredale produced a decanter and glasses and a carafe of water. Then he excused himself while he went to change his clothes. While he was gone Hervey helped himself to a liberal measure of the spirit. He felt that it would be beneficial just then. His waist ached, and

manner was a little disconcerting. The rancher seemed much harder to tackle when he was present.

Presently Iredale returned, and seating himself in a deck chair produced a pipe, and pushed his tobacco-jar over to his visitor. He was wondering what Hervey had come over for. He had no wish for his company just then. He had hoped to spend this evening alone. His mind was still in a state of feverish turmoil. However, he decided that he would get rid of the man as quickly as the laws of hospitality would allow.

A silence fell whilst the rancher waited to hear the object of the visit. The other refused to smoke, but Iredale lit his pipe and smoked solemnly. His face was, if possible, more serious than usual. His eyes he kept half veiled. Hervey cast about in his mind for the opening of his attack. He seated himself on the edge of the table and looked out of the window. He raised his eyes to the leaden sky, then he withdrew his gaze and looked upon the floor. He swung one leg to and fro, as he leaned sideways, and supported his attitude with a hand resting upon the table. At length as the silence continued and Iredale presently raised his eyes and stared straight at him, he turned to the decanter and helped himself to another drink. Then he set his glass down with a heavy hand.

"Good tack, that," he observed. "By the bye, where have all your owls departed to? Are they like the ducks, merely come, pause, and proceed on their migratory way? Or perhaps—with a leer—"they only stand on sentry in the valley when—when you require them to."

Iredale permitted the suspicion of a smile. But there was no geniality in it, on the contrary it was the movement of his facial muscles alone. Hervey had touched upon delicate ground.

"Did they not welcome you with their wonted exclamation?" he asked removing his pipe from his lips, and gently pressing the ash down into the bowl with his finger-tip.

The other grinned significantly. He had plunged, and now he felt that things were about to mend. Doubtless the spirit had warmed him.

"That's a real good game you play, George, old man. The imitation is excellent. I was deceived entirely by it. It was only the other night that I learned that those fearful screech-owls were human. Most ingenious on your part. You are well served."

Iredale never moved. He smoked quite calmly. His legs were crossed and the smile still remained about his mouth. Only his eyes changed their expression, but this was lost upon Hervey, for they were half closed.

"I don't think I quite understand. Will you explain?" The rancher spoke very deliberately, his voice was well modulated but cold.

Hervey laughed boisterously to cover a slight nervousness. This attitude of Iredale's was embarrassing. He had anticipated something different.

"Is there any need of explanation?" he asked, when his forced hilarity had abruptly terminated. "The only thing which puzzles me is that you've kept it up so long without being discovered."

There was a long pause. Then Iredale removed his pipe from his mouth, knocked it out upon the heel of his boot, and returned it to his pocket. Then he rose from his seat and stood squarely before the other.

"Don't let us beat about the bush," he said. "I think plain speaking is best—in some cases. Now, what have you to say?"

Hervey shrugged his shoulders. His dark eyes avoided the other's gaze, the steely flash in Iredale's grey eyes was hard to confront.

"A good deal," he said, with raucous intonation. "The smuggling of Chinese and consequently opium is a profitable trade. There's room for more than one in it."

"Go on."

Iredale's tone was icy.

"Of course I am not the man to blow a gaff like this. There's too much money in it, especially when worked on extensive lines, and when one is possessed of such an ideal spot as this from which to operate. That was a positive stroke of genius of yours in selecting the graveyard as a hiding place. I suppose now that place is honeycombed with cellars for the storage of—of—

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yellow. Must be, from the number of 'yellow-devils' I saw come out of the grave the other night. My, but you're slick, Iredale; slick as paint. I admire you immensely. Who'd have thought of such a thing? I tell you what, you were never intended for anything but defeating the law, George, my boy. We could do a lot together. I suppose you aren't looking for a partner?"

Iredale's face wore an almost genial expression as he replied. The rancher's tones were so cordial that Hervey congratulated himself upon the manner in which he had approached the subject.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I wasn't," he said. "As a matter of fact, you must have seen me despatching my last cargo of yellow. Why? Were you thinking of starting in the business?"

"That is my intention."

"Is it?"

"Yes, is," Hervey's tone was emphatic, and his attitude truculent.

"Ah! are you prepared to buy this place?" Iredale went on. "I can easily hand you over my connection."

"Buy?" Hervey thought this man was dense.

"Why, I haven't two cents to my name to buy anything with. No, I don't think there will be any buying and selling between us, George Iredale."

"Then what do you propose? We may as well come to a definite arrangement."

The rancher's tone was peculiar.

"We'll run this thing for all it's worth. Hang to it as long as there's a cent to be made."

Hervey helped himself to more whisky. His self-satisfaction was immense. He had not thought that Iredale would have been so easy to handle.

"Um. A very nice, comfortable arrangement—for you," Iredale mumbled as he sipped slowly. "You'll sip the juice while I squeeze the orange for you. No, friend Hervey, I'm not dealing."

"But you must!"

"Must?"

"Yes, don't be a fool. It means more money to you, and I shall share in the profits."

"If I wanted to make more money I could continue

in the business alone. I am not here to make money for you."

Iredale stared straight into the face before him. His grey eyes seemed to pierce through and through his companion. Hervey moved from his position. Iredale's attitude was coldly uncompromising.

"Then you refuse my offer?"

"Most emphatically."

Hervey was inclined to show his teeth. However, he checked the impulse and spoke in a conciliating tone.

"There is another alternative. Your fortune is very large. I want fifty thousand dollars."

Iredale's face relaxed into a genuine smile.

"Your demands are too modest," he said ironically.

"Anything else?"

The other's eyes looked dangerous. The lurid depths were beginning to glow.

"The money I am going to have before I leave here to-night."

"Ah! blackmail. I thought so."

Iredale's contempt was biting.

"Call it what you like, Mr. George Iredale. I tell you this, you are in my power and you will have to buy my silence. You like plain speaking; and now you've got it. Refuse compliance, and I leave here to expose you."

"Pooh," said Iredale, leisurely turning to the window. "Do you think I'm a babe? How are you going to prove your charge? Why, you must be the veriest simpleton to think I am unprepared. By the time you can bring the law about me there will not remain a trace of my work. You can never bring your charge home."

"Ah, you think not." Hervey's words sounded like a snarl. The whisky he had drunk had worked him to a proper pitch. He had not done yet. His next shot was to be a long one and a bold one, and he was not sure where it would hit. He was not sure that it might not rebound and—but his was the nature which makes for success or disaster without a second thought. For him there was no middle course. His temperament was volcanic and his actions were largely governed by the passionate nature which was his. Iredale had not

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turned from the window as he would have seen the evil working of that face. His own great broad shoulders were set squarely before Harvey's gaze and the unconscious promising attitude only added fuel to the latter's already superheated feelings. "Perhaps you might find it interesting to know that they are not upon the trail of the man who shot Leslie Grey."

Iredale swung round like a flash. Not were the storm clouds which but now framed in the heavens more black than the expression of his face.

"You miserable hound!" he cried, his eyes sparkling and his jaw muscles fairly quivering with the force of his clenching teeth. "What hellish crime would you attempt to fix on me now?"

Harvey grinned with all the ferocity of a tiger.

"I wish to fix no crime on you," I merely mention a fact. Leslie Grey was the only accused of his murder. He stated before he died that the man who inserted the notice in the paper which ran, 'I now bring a stamp on Grey' was the man who murdered him. I suppose you don't happen to know who was responsible for that enigmatical line? You did not inspire it?"

The look that accompanied the man's words was fiendish. The great eyes shone with a savage light. They expressed a hatred which no words could describe. Iredale's hands clenched and unclenched. His fingers seemed as though they were clatching at something which they would be torn to atoms, and his thoughts centred upon the man before him.

Twice that day he had heard this challenge. Once uttered in all unconsciousness of its significance, but now with hellish meaning. His powers of self-restraint were great, but he had reached their limit. This man had accused him of a dastardly murder. Suddenly his voice rang out through the room like the bellows of a madened bull. His great figure quivered with the fury of his passion. Harvey had done his worst, now he shrunk before the storm he had provoked.

"Out of my house, you scum!" Iredale roared. "God! but if you stay here an instant longer, I'll smash you as I would a louse."

The rancher stood panting at the door. His flashing



eyes never left the face of the man before him. Hervey moved; he hesitated. The grin had left his face and a look of dread had replaced it. Then he moved on, forgetful of all but his moral and physical fear of the commanding figure of enraged manhood that seemed to tower over him. He even forgot the weapon which lay concealed in his pocket. He slunk on out of the door amidst a profound silence, out into the soft twilight of the valley.

The door stood open; the window stood open. Iredale looked after him. He watched the tall, drooping figure; then, as Hervey passed from view, Iredale turned back and flung himself into his chair, and his laugh sounded through the stillness of the room.

But there was no mirth in that laugh. It was like the hysterical laugh of a man whose nerves are strained to breaking tension.

He knew he had made a terrible mistake. His rage had placed a deadly weapon in his enemy's hands. He had practically admitted his authorship of the notice in the Winnipeg paper. What would be the result? he asked himself. Again that strained laugh sounded through the room.

As Hervey rode away from the valley his fear of George Iredale fell from him as might a cloak. His face wore full expression of the evil in his heart.

He, too, laughed; but his laugh was an expression of triumph.

"You're less clever than I thought, George Iredale," he muttered. "You would have done better to have bought my silence. Now I can sell my discovery elsewhere. Money I want, and money I mean to have."

But he spurred his horse on as an anxious thought came to him.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A STAR IN THE DARK

MRS. MALLING fumbled her glasses out of her pocket and adjusted them on her nose. She had paused in her work to receive her letters, which had just been brought from Lakeville. The girls stood by waiting to learn the news.

The summer kitchen was stifling hot. The great cook-stove, throwing off a fearful heat, helped to brighten the brilliancy of the farm-wife's complexion, and brought beads of perspiration out upon her forehead. Prudence and Alice looked cool beside "Mother Hephzy," but then they were never allowed to do any work in the kitchen. Mrs. Malling loved her kitchen better than any part of the house. She had always reigned supreme there, and as long as she could work such would always be the case.

Now she was preparing the midday meal for the threshing gang which was at work in the fields. Great blocked tin canteens stood about upon the floor waiting to receive the hot food which was to be sent down to the workers. Hephzibah was a woman of generous instincts where the inner man was concerned. The wages she paid were always board wages, but no hired man was ever allowed to work for her and pay for his keep. She invariably insisted that every labourer should be fed from her kitchen, and she took care that his food was the best she could provide.

"Alice, girl," the old lady said, as she tore open the first letter, "go and see if Ardy is hatching-up yet. Tell him that the dinner boxes will be ready in quarter-hour. Maybe you'll find him in the bean patch. I sent him to gather a peck o' broad beans. Who's this from?" she went on, turning to the last page of her letter to look at

the signature. "H. m. Wainwright—the bank. Guess I'll read that later."

Alice ran off to find Andy, and Mrs. Malling picked up another envelope.

"Prudence, my girl," went on the farm wife, as soon as Alice's back was turned, "just open that other," pointing to a blue envelope. "The postmark reads Ansley. I take it, it's from young Hobbs Chillingwood. Maybe it's to say as he'll be along directly."

Prudence picked the last letter up.

"It is hot in here, mother, I wonder you can stand it."

Her mother looked up over her spectacles.

"Stand 'r chud? It's a woman's place, is the kitchen. I can't trust no one at the stove but myself. I've done it for ever forty summers, an' I don't reckon to give it up now. This is from that place feller. He ain't doing much I'm thinking. Seems to me he spends most of his time in making up his bills of expenses. Howsum, you look into it. What a Master He'll say?"

She put her glasses back into their broad old-fashioned case and turned back to the stove. She could never allow anything to keep her long from her cooking. She lifted a lid and stabbed her cooking fork gently into a great boiler full of potatoes. Then she passed round to the other side and stoked up the fire.

"Oh, what a shame, mother! Won't Al be disappointed! Hobb can't come out here, at least not to stay." Prudence had finished her letter and now looked disappointedly over at her mother.

"And how be that?" asked the old lady, standing with a shovel of anthracite coal poised in her hand.

"He says that the rush of emigrants to the district keeps him at work from daylight to dark. It's too bad. Poor old Al!"

Mrs. Malling dumped the coal into the stove with a clatter and replaced the circular iron top. She said nothing, and Prudence went on.

"He's coming out this way on business shortly, and will call over here if possible. But he can't stay. Says he's making money now, and is writing to Al and giving her all particulars. I am werry he can't come."

"Well, well, maybe it's for the best," said her mother,

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in a consolatory manner. "Seemingly his coming would only have caused bickerings with Hervey, and, good sakes, we get enough of that now. I'm not one for underhand dealings, but I'm thinking it would be for the best not to say anything to your brother about his coming at all. If he asks, just say he can't come to stop. I'd sooner keep Hervey under my eye. If he gives off as he said, you never know what mischief he'll be getting up to. He just goes into Winnipeg and gets around with them oral swags and—and you never know. I have heard tell though he never lets on, as he's too fond o' poker. Leastways, I do know as he spends more money than is good for him. Sarah and me was talking only the other day. Sarah's pert as a cat, and she declares that he's got gaming writ in his lines. Maybe it's so. I'll not dispute. He won't have no excuse for leaving now." And she sighed heavily and took up the vegetables from the stove.

Alice returned, and the sound of wheels outside told the farm-wife that the buckboard was ready for the men's dinner.

The two girls and the old lady portioned out the food into the great cauldrons, and Andy lifted them on to the buckboard. Then the chairman drove away.

By the time the farm dinner was ready Alice had quite got over her disappointment. Prudence had told her the contents of the letter, and also her mother's wishes on the subject. Alice was naturally too cheerful to think much of the matter, besides, she was glad that Robb's business was improving.

Hervey came up from the fields in Andy's buckboard. He always came home for his dinner, and to-day he brought an atmosphere of unaccustomed cheerfulness with him. He had spent much thought and consideration upon his relations with George Irrdale, and the result of his reflections was displayed in his manner when he returned from the fields. Never in his life had he held such a handful of trumps. His hand needed little playing, and the chances of a cruel ruff looked to him remote.

After the meal he went out to the barn, where he smoked for awhile in pensive solitude. He thought long and earnestly, and was so absorbed that he looked up

with a start at the sound of his mother's voice calling to him from the open kitchen window.

"Hearst yourself, Hervey! boy! There's work to be done down in the fields which is your share in the day's doings."

And the man, removing the pipe from his mouth, forgot to grumble back a rough retort, and answered quite cheerfully—

"All right, mother. Is Prudence there?"

"Where about she be, if not?" replied his mother, turning back from the window to tell his sister that she was wanted.

Prudence came out. Hervey watched her as she approached. He could not but admit to himself the prettiness of her trim figure, the quiet sweetness of her beautiful, gentle face. Gazing intently he failed to observe the faint shadow in the expression of her soft brown eyes. There was no sympathy in his nature, and without sympathy it would have been impossible to read the expression. But Prudence was feeling a little sad and a little hurt. In vain he tried to find his promise. Two days had passed since he had told her that he loved her and had asked her to be his wife. Not more than, had he been over to the farm, nor had she heard a word from him. Fortunately she told herself, she had said nothing of what had passed between them, not even to her friend Alice, thus she was spared the sympathy of her friends. She had waited for his coming with a world of eager delight in her heart, and each moment of the day on which he was to have come to see her mother had been one of unalloyed happiness to her. Then as the evening drew on she became anxious. And again as night came, and still he was not in him, her anxiety had given place to alarm. That night she slept little, but she kept her trouble to herself. Alice was all eagerness to ask questions of her friend, but Prudence gave her no opportunity. The next morning a note had arrived. It announced to him, but he would be over at the earliest possible moment. And now the third day was well advanced and he still remained away. She did not doubt him, but she felt hurt and a little rebellious at the thought of his allowing himself to be detained by business. Surely his first duty

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was to her. It was not like him, she told herself, and she felt very unhappy.

Hervey greeted her with an assumption of kindness almost affection.

"Are you very busy? I mean I want to have a little talk with you. I've been working in my garden lately. You may guess in what direction. And I have made a strange discovery. We haven't hit it off very well, I know, but you must forgive me my shortcomings. I have lived too long in the north to be a peasant companion. Can you spare me a few minutes?"

The dark eyes of the man were quite gentle in their expression, and in the girl's present state of mind his apparent kindness had a strong effect upon her. She was surprised, but she turned up to his face with a world of gratitude. In spite of all, her love for her brother was very deeply rooted. The simplicity of his nature and the life she lived made her an easy victim to his villainous wiles.

"Why, yes, Hervey; as long as you like."

"Good, I'm going down to the threshing. Will you walk some part of the way with me? Mother has just reminded me that my work must not be neglected. Another two days and we shall be ready for the fall ploughing."

The sun was pouring down with fervid intensity. The yard was very still and quiet. Everything that had leisure was resting drowsily in the trifling shade obtainable. The swine had ceased to make themselves heard and were sleeping upon each other's skeletons. The fowls were scratching with ruffled feathers in the sun-baked crevices of the parched earth, which they had made during the hours of morning energy. The pigeons had departed for the day to the shelter of a distant loft. Even the few horses remaining within the barn were dozing. The dog Neche alone seemed restless. He seemed to share with his master the stormy passions of a cruel heart; for with infinite duplicity, he was lying low, pretending to be occupied with a great beef shun bone, while his red eyes watched intently the movements of half a dozen weary milk cows, which were vainly endeavouring to reach the shelter of their sheds. But the dog would not leave it.

With a refinement of torture he would allow them to move slowly towards their yard, then, just as they were about to enter, he would fly into a dreadful passion and, hurling stones at their heads, would chase them out upon the pavement and then return once more to his bone, only to await his opportunity of repeating the operation.

Hervey and Prudence moved away and passed down the trail. Nedda reluctantly left his bone, having satisfied himself in a comprehensive survey that no canine outsider was about who could steal his treasure during his absence, and followed them. He walked beside the girl without any sign of pressure. He was a dog that seemed to find no joy in his master's or mistress's company. He seemed to have no affection in him, and lived a life of mute protest.

Hervey did not speak for a few minutes. It was Prudence who broke the silence.

"I suppose it is something to do with Lebe's death that you want to talk to me about. I wondered what your object was when you questioned me so closely upon his dying words. Have you discovered a fresh clue?"

"Something more than a fresh clue," Hervey had relapsed into his old moroseness.

"Ah!" The girl's face lit with an almost painful eagerness. For a moment her own immediate troubles were forgotten. A wild feeling surged up in her heart which set the blood thrilling in her veins, and she waited almost breathlessly for her brother's next words.

Hervey displayed no haste. Rather he seemed as though he would gain time.

"That message or advertisement in the paper. Did you ever attempt to fathom its meaning? It was something of a puzzle."

Prudence gazed up at the dark face beside her. Hervey was looking down upon the dusty trail. His look was one of profound thought. In reality he was calculating cost in bones.

"I tried but found nothing. To me it conveyed nothing beyond the fact that its author shot Nedda."

"Just so. But before I tell you what I have discovered you must understand the argument. That line contained a message, a message so significant that once read with

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understanding the mystery of Grey's death became one that a child might solve."

"Yes, yes, but the reading of it," Prudence exclaimed impatiently.

"It is intelligible to me."

"And—"

It was a different girl to the one we have hitherto seen who awaited the man's next words. The mild, gentle woman, the patient, even dignified, had given place to a wild, swift, burning creature which bore a strange resemblance to her brother's. A moment had arrived, her life when circumstances assured that other side of her character of which, perhaps, even she had been ignorant. She learned now of her own capacity for hatred and revenge. Some preliminary warfare of her violent passions had been given when Loren had died, but the moment had passed without full realization. Now she felt the rushing sway of a wave of passion which seemed to rise from somewhere in her heart and creep over her faculties, looking her up as an entrance in which she felt her good motives and love being crushed out of all recognition. There could be no doubt as to the resemblance between these two people in that one touch of nature. If they was a long time in answering. He had not only to tell her of his discovery, but these were his personal interests to consider. He wished to reassure himself of his own advantage.

"See here, Prue, what are you offering, or rather, is another offering—to that detective, hap if he discovers the murderer of Grey? Let us quite understand one another. I don't intend to part with my discovery for nothing. I want money as badly as anybody can want it. For a consideration I'll tell you and point you to the who murdered your man. Provided, of course, the consideration is sufficiently large. Otherwise I say nothing."

For a moment Prudence looked up from beneath her own helmet into her brother's face. The storm in her look was withering. She had long since learned the selfish nature of this man, but she had not realized the full depths to which he had sunk until now. He would sell his infer-



mation. And the thought scorched her brain with its dreadful significance.

"How much will you buy me?" she asked at last. And words fail to express the contempt she conveyed in her tone.

Hervey laughed in a hollow fashion.

"You don't put it nicely," he said. "Ah, how must you buy me?" he added thoughtfully.

"When a man chooses the methods of Judas it seems to me there need be no picking or choosing of words. What do you want? How much?"

His answer came swiftly. He spoke eagerly and his tone was quite different from that which his companion was used to. It was as if some deep note in his more obscure nature had been struck, and was now making itself heard above the raucous jangling of discord by which his life was torn. His words were almost passionate and there was a ring of truth in them which was astonishing coming from such a man.

"Look here, Prue, I want to get away from here. I want to get out upon the world again, alone, to make my life what I choose. I can't stand this place, the quiet surrounding me, the people with whom I come in contact. It isn't living, it's existence, and a hellish one at that. Look around, Prue, nothing but prairie. In the winter snow, endless snow, in the summer the brown, scorched prairie. The sound of unrelieved monotonous labour, farming, can mind of man conceive a life more deadly? No, no! I want to get away from it all, back to the life in which I was my own master, unfettered by duties and distasteful labours for which I am responsible to others. From the beginning my life has been a failure. But that was not, really my fault. I worked hard and my ideas were sound and good. Then I met with misfortune. My life was my own to make or mar after that, what I chose to do with it was my own concern. But here I do not live. I want the means to get away, to make a fresh start in different surroundings. Sooner or later I must go, or I shall become a raving maniac. You can help me in this, even as I can help you in the cause in which you are now spending and wasting a lot of money. Get mother to give me fifteen thousand dollars, not only as the price

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of my information but also to help me, as your brother, to make another start. I am not wanted here, neither do I want to remain."

He ceased speaking. The truth had died out of his tone when he mentioned the money, and his words were the specious wheedling of one who knows the general kindness of those with whom he is dealing. But Prudence gave no heed to anything but that which found an answering chord in the passionate emotion which swayed her. Hervey's appeal to get away drew from her some slight proportion of sympathetic understanding, but her main feeling was a desire to learn the truth which he had discovered.

"Yes, yes; but the clue—discovery."

"First, the money. First, you must show me that you will do this thing for me."

"I can only answer for myself. I can promise nothing in mother's name."

"Yes, but for yourself? You have an interest in the farm."

"Yes, I will give you all I have—all, all, if you can prove to me, and in a court of law, who was the man who shot Leslie Grey. I have saved nearly everything I have made out of creamery. It is not as large a sum as you require, but I can raise the rest from mother. You shall have all you ask if you can tell me this thing. But bear this in mind, Hervey, you will have to prove your words. I give you my word of honour that the money will be forthcoming when you have accomplished this thing."

Prudence spoke earnestly. But there was caution in what she said. She did not trust her brother. And though she was ready to pay almost anything for the accomplishment of her purpose, she was not going to allow herself to be tricked.

Hervey didn't like these stipulations. He had calculated to extort a price for his information only. The proving of his charge was a matter which would entail time and trouble and something else which he did not care to contemplate; besides, he wanted to get away. His recollection of his recent interview with Iredale was still with him. And he remembered well the rancher's attitude. It struck him that George Iredale would fight hard to prove his innocence. He wondered uncomfortably if

he could establish it. No, he must make a better bargain than the girl offered.

"See here, Prue, this is a matter of business. There is no sentiment in it as far as I am concerned. Your conditions are too hard. You pay me half the money down when I give you the story. You can pay the rest when I have carried out your further conditions. It is only fair. Establishing a case in the law courts is a thing that takes time. And, besides, I have known guilty people to get off before now. I can convince you of the truth of my case. A jury is different."

Prudence thought for a moment. They were already within earshot of the threshers. And the droning of the machine and the jerky spluttering of the traction engine sounded pleasantly in the sultry atmosphere. The dog hobbled lazily at her heels, nor did he show the least sign of interest in his surroundings. The wagons loaded with corn and sheaves were drawing up to the threshers from all directions, whilst those already emptied were departing for fresh supplies. Everywhere was a wondrous peace; only in those two hearts was an ocean of unrest.

"Very well. If you can convince me, it shall be as you wish. You shall have the money. The rest shall remain until after the jury's verdict. I am not prepared to give you the money I have saved for any tale you choose to concoct. Now let me have your story. You have shown me too much of your sordid craving to make me a ready believer."

"You will believe me before I have finished. Prue," the man retorted with a bitter laugh. "You will find corroboration for what I have to tell in your own knowledge of certain facts."

"So much the better for you. Go on."

In spite of her cast-iron words Prudence waited with nerves tingling and with rapidly beating heart for her brother's story. She did not know herself. She did not understand the feelings which assailed her. Hervey had an easier task than either of them believed. Of late she had dwelt so long so intently upon the matter under discussion that she was ready to believe almost anything which offered a solution to the ghastly mystery. But she did not know this. Hervey told his story with all the

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evening of a man who appreciates the results which attach to the effects of his words. He had no detail which could further his ends.

"Gerry on his deathbed alluded to the notice in the paper. He did so in answer to your question as to who had shot him?"

"Yes."

"He was perfectly conscious?"

"Yes."

"Some time before he died you and he had discussed this notice, and he told you he was negotiating a coup in which that notice had afforded him his principal clue." The girl nodded, and Hervey went on. "Gerry was a Customs officer. All his work centred round contraband. No other work came into his sphere of operations. Very well, the clue which that notice afforded had to do with some illicit traffic. The question is, What was the nature of that traffic? Here is the obvious solution. 'Yellow-brooming.' What trade is known by such a title as 'Yellow' in this country? There is only one. Traffic in Chinese. The smuggling of Chinese across the border. And this traffic was booming. Operations were being successfully carried out. Where? The rest is easy. Somewhere in Grey's district. 'Slump in Grey' could very well mean, under the circumstances, that Grey's supervision was so slack that the work was carried out in spite of him. You know everybody knows that Chinese are smuggled into Canada at many points along the border, and that opium is brought in at the same time. Thus the peon tax and the opium tax are avoided by men who make a living out of this traffic. The profit is worth the risk. There is a lot of money in big opium. The authorities are endeavouring to put it down. It is well known that the police are swarming with Chinese for whom no peon tax has been paid. And yet the legitimate importation of opium does not increase. Rather has it decreased in consequence of the prohibitive tax imposed upon it. Still, these Chinese must have their opium. This then was the coup poor Gerry meditated. He had discovered a hot bed of opium smuggling. If he succeeded in rounding the smugglers up, it meant a great deal to his future prospects. Is that all plain?"

"Yes, yes; go on."

The girl's eyes were gleaming strangely. She followed every word her brother said with an intention which boded well for the result of his efforts. The careful array of arguments was speciously detailed. And she waited for what was still to come without any attempt at concealing her impatience. For the time everything was forgotten while she learned of the murderer of her first love. The fearful scene about her was set before eyes which no longer gazed with intelligence upon their surroundings. She was back in the farm-park listening to Leslie's story of his hopes, his aspirations. Every detail of that evening was brought vividly back to her memory. She remembered, too, that that was the night in which Harvey had returned. There was a significance in the thought that was not lost upon her.

Harvey had come to a stand, and Prudence placed herself before him. Neche squatted beside her, and as he sat his head reached up to her waist.

"Very well. The question alone remains, who along the border in this part of the country is smuggling Chinese? And having found your man, did he insert the notice in question?"

"Yes—and you—"

"Chance pointed out the man to me. And I have ascertained the rest."

"And who is the murderer of Leslie?"

There was an unresponsive pause. Harvey gazed down into the eager upturned face. The dog beside the girl moved restlessly, and as he moved he made a curious whining noise. His nose was held high in the air, and his greenish eyes looked up towards the spotless sun-bonnet.

"The owner of Lonely Ranch, George Indale!"

Harvey turned abruptly away. Neche had moved a little way back along the trail and stood looking about him. Then out on the still air rang a piercing hysterical laugh. And Prudence stretched out her arm and clutched at the barbed wire fence-post as though her truth had overcome her.

Harvey looked sharply round upon her. Neche gave a low growl, the noise seemed to have offended him; then he humped off down the trail back to the house.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE MAGGOT AT THE CORN

HERVEY'S look of surprise quickly changed to one of displeasure. To him his sister's attitude merely suggested incredulity, nothing more.

"Well?" he said at last, as her laugh died out suddenly.

Prudence turned upon him with a strange fierceness.

"Go on. You must tell me more than that to convince me. George Iredale—smuggler, murderer! You must be mad!"

Hervey kept himself well in hand. He was playing for a great stake. He would lose nothing through any ill-advised bluster.

"I was never more sane in my life," he answered coldly. "I am ready to prove my words."

"Prove them."

Prudence's face and the tone of her voice were icy. Her mouth was set firmly, the declined corners testifying to the hard setting of her jaws. She looked straight into her brother's face with an intentness which made him lower his eyes. He had no conception of the fires which he had stirred within her. One unquerable desire swayed her. This man must tell her all he knew. Then she would refute every word, tell him what manner of man he was, and have him driven from the farm. She hated him at that moment as she might hate a rattlesnake. She was filled with a longing to strike him, her own brother, to the earth.

Hervey spoke in measured, even tones.

"You know the ranch and its surroundings well. You have been there. You have heard the so-called owl cries which greet the visitor upon entering the valley. Those are not owl cries at all, but the work of human sentries

always on the watch ready to give immediate alarm at the approach of danger. The secret of the ranch lies in the graveyard." Providence started. "That is where I made my first discovery, a discovery of which I should not have underestimated the significance but for your expert opinion when I was in that region two or three days before. At the time I thought I had come upon the corner for the first time. I had Noche with me. I pointed at the wooden fence which surrounded it, and surveyed the overgrown graves. While I did so Noche chuckled about among them with canine impudic venoms. Suddenly he became agitated, and showed signs of having hit upon a hot spot. I was half-hungry already. He ran up a path and then paused at one of the stone marked places. Then he began to tear wildly at the edge of it. I followed him, and saw that he had dug a hole below the stone. I followed him away and found that beneath the stone the grave was broken. Then I moved hastily away and taking the dog to the nearest dead house put him on the west side. He dashed in whining excitedly as he went. It was while I stood watching for his return that I discovered the most significant point. Directly under my feet somewhere under the ground I heard a sound of hammering. Then I knew that the graveyard was no longer the resting place of the dead, but the abode of the living. Instantly I comprehended all the details of your ghost story and determined to witness for myself the scenes you had observed. Settle it for once and all in your mind. I was troubled with no superstitious fears upon the matter. I pursued the truth." Harvey broke in but resumed quickly. "That evening I returned to the graveyard over a trundle and took up a position in the dark shelter of the surrounding woods. I saw all you saw. But the rotting figures were not the ghosts which you thought them to be, they were Chinese carrying their barrels and trunks of personal baggage and I have no doubt a cargo of opium. Then I understood that the graveyard was honeycombed with cells, and that this place formed the central depot of illicit traffic and his distributing station. I can understand how these 'pollow-dos' are distributed by means of loaded barriques and such things. The point I have not fathomed is the manner

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by which the "goods" are brought into the country. I suggest the only means I can think of as being almost without risk, and that is the lake."

Mervyn paused to watch the effect of his story. Prudence gave no sign. She no longer looked at her companion, but away across the harvested fields in the direction of Iredale's ranch. As he waited for her comment her lips moved.

"Go on" was all she said, and the man proceeded.

"It was an unconscious expression which in the first flush of discovery, I made use of which ultimately gave me a clue to the rest. As realization of Iredale's designs came to me I thought of the notorious 'Traffic in Yellow.' That night I pondered long over the whole thing. I had learned to like Iredale better than any man I have ever known. He had always seemed such an honest, straightforward man. And all of you folks were so fond of him. It was a painful awakening, but there was worse to come, for, as I lay awake thinking, there flashed through my brain the recollection of what you had told me of Grey's death and his reference to the notice in the paper. Instantly the interpretation of that line came to me. It related to the yellow traffic. And I shuddered as I reviewed the possibilities which my discovery opened up. I couldn't rest. A feverish desire to know the worst assailed me. I questioned you as you may remember, and with every reply you gave me my fears received confirmation. In the end I could no longer keep silence, and my anger drove me to a measure which I have since almost regretted, for it has destroyed the last vestige of the regard I entertained for the man you have all admired and respected. I went over to the ranch and challenged George Iredale——"

"On the night of the storm. The night he visited me. Go on." Prudence's face was ghastly in its pallor. She gave no other sign of emotion.

"Yes, on the night of the storm. I taxed him with smuggling. He admitted it. I taxed him with the authorship of that notice——"

"Well?" The girl leant forward in her eagerness.

"He did not contradict it. His attitude was a tacit admission. That is my evidence."



Hervey ceased speaking, and a long pause followed. The man waited. He did not wish to hurry her. He was not blind to the fact that she regarded Iredale with something more than mere friendly feeling, and, with fiendish cunning he had played upon the knowledge by his allusions to his own regard for the man and the trust which they all placed in him. This woman's love for Iredale he knew would help him; for, gradually, as the damning evidence he had produced filtered through her armour of loyal affection, her hatred for the man would be doubled and trebled. In this Hervey displayed a knowledge of human nature which one would scarcely have credited him with.

At last Prudence turned. The pallor of her face was unchanged. Only the look in her eyes had altered. The horror which had shone there had become a world of piteous appeal. All her soul shone forth in those sweet, brown eyes. Surely it must have seared a heart of stone to resist her. Her body was leaning forward, her two brown hands were held out towards him.

"I don't believe it! I can't believe it! George is no—murderer."

Hervey's great eyes lowered before that heartfelt look. His face was a study in hopelessness. From his expression of deep sorrow Iredale might have been his own brother who was accused of murder.

"I'm afraid there is no hope of what you say, Prue. Leslie was conscious, he knew what he was saying. Iredale had every reason for shooting him. The circumstantial evidence is damning. The most sceptical jury would be convinced."

"O God! O God! And he has asked me to be his wife." Prudence covered her face with her hands, and her body heaved with great, passionate sobs.

Hervey started at the words. His face lit up with a wicked joy. This was better than he had expected. George should pay dearly for his refusal to buy his silence.

"You say he dared to propose to you with that foul crime upon his soul? He is a worse villain than I had believed. By heavens, he shall swing for his crime! I had hoped that my news had come in time to save you

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this cruel wrong. The scum! The foul, black-hearted scum!"

Hervey's rage was melodramatic. But the girl, even in the depths of her misery and distraught feelings, was impressed. Her heart cried out for her lover and proclaimed his innocence in terms which would not be quibbled. His image rose before her mind's eye, and she looked upon that calmly strong face the sign of bearing of that man's figure, and the story she had, at last, to become cleared as her faith in him rose superior to the evidence of her senses. It could not be. Her quivering lips struggled to frame the words she would utter, but no sound came. Hervey's words had left the appearance of deep, honest sorrow for his sister paralyzed her faculties and he pushed it with her heart.

The man moved forward to her side, and touched her gently on the shoulders.

"Come, Prue, we had best go back to the house. I can do no work to-day. You, too, need quiet for reflection. The heartless villain!" And he harped upon the information he had just given, and ended his speech.

Prudence would be wiser to be sed. She did not care whether she went or what happened. She was outside of reasoning. She was stunned by the cruel blow that had fallen. Later she would recover herself for all such blows are but passing, in waking moments and reason cannot long remain inert and empty obtain. But the present was a most awful trial.

Hervey grew unconquerable at the girl's prolonged silence. He cared nothing for her feelings, he cared nothing for the heart he had broken. He cared only for the money he had not yet secured. He realized only too well that whatever protest his sister might offer he had convinced her of his own guilt. It was only a question of time before she admitted it. But a mere feeling of doubt prompted him to secure his wage without delay. Thus his greed rushed him on to a false trail.

His face to the house he broke the silence.

"Well, Prue, you cannot refute my evidence. Indeed, in the man you have all been seeking. I have served you well. You yourself have escaped a crime which would have brought you lifelong regret. Think of it! Who

would it have meant to you had you married the man? Terrible! Terrible!"

The girl nodded. "There was a wild hunted look in her eyes. Her father's words had in some way driven her at bay. He had struck a chord which had set her own nerve on edge, and she had stood on the best and proudest. A flood of passionate protest surged to her lips and flowed forth in a seething torrent. She remembered what his story had been told for, she had forgotten for the moment, as well had he acted his part, and had thought only that what he had said was the outcome of his regard for her. So she turned upon him like a tigeress.

"Julian," she cried, a flash of rage sweeping up into her face as the words flowed from between her teeth. "You have come to set this man. Your thoughts have nothing to do with the setting out of human justice. You want a price for some little worth. I loathe you! What curse is on our land that you should have been born into it? You should have your money, do you hear? You shall have it and with it give my curse. It is not yet. My results are not finished. I do not believe you, your story has not convinced me. I can see no reason in it. Ha, ha," and she laughed hysterically. "You cannot make me believe it because I will not. You shall have your money. I will not go back on my word, but you must fulfil the conditions. You must convince me of the reason in your story. You will even ~~say~~ pay as you have ever earned anything in your life. Should I tell you how you will earn it? You will prove your story before judge and jury. When you have convinced them you will have convinced me. Then I will pay you. My God, what taint has brought such blood into the veins of our flesh? If Iredale is the murderer he shall pay the extreme penalty, and you, whether you like it or not, shall be instrumental in that punishment. You shall be his accuser, you shall see him to the scaffold. And after it is over, after you have received the sum of your blood-money, I will tell the world of your design. That you, my brother, demanded a price for your work. They, the world, shall know you shall loathe you as I loathe you. You shall be an outcast wherever you go stamped with the brand of Julian—the most despised of all men. Better for

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you if you stand in George Inedale's place on the scaffold than face the world as branded. (Oh you wretched man, you have destroyed my life—my all!) Go, and bring the police. Go to those whom duty it is to listen to such stories as yours. Now I will drive you to it, you shall go whether you like it or not. Refuse, and I will lay the information and force you to become a witness. You thought you were dealing with a soft, silly woman, you thought to enjoy the price out of me, and then having obtained what you desired, to leave me to do the work. Fool! You will face George Inedale, the accused and the accused. You shall earn your money. I know the ways of such men as you. Do you know what you are doing? Do you know the name that such work as yours goes by? It is blackmail!"

The girl gasped for breath. Then she went on with a bitterness that was almost worse than the contempt in all she had said before.

"But rest content. Every penny you have asked for shall be yours when Inedale's crimes are estimated. Nor shall I give to the world the story of my brother's perfidy until such time as you have gone out of our world for ever. You go from now— I will not walk beside you."

Hervey's face was a study in villainous expression as he listened to his sister's hysterical denunciation. He knew the reason of her tirade. He knew that she loved Inedale. He had convinced her of this long ago, as he knew this. And now woman-like she turned upon him, for his hand, his words had destroyed her happiness. But her words struck hard. The lowest nature cares not what others think of them, but those others' spoken thoughts have a different effect. So it was with Hervey. It mattered nothing to him what the girl thought of him—what the world thought of him. But words abuse had still power to move him.

She struck the right note when she said the money down was what he wanted. Now he saw that he had overreached himself, and he cursed himself for having trusted to a woman's promise. There was but one thing left for him to do. He controlled himself well when he replied:

"Very well, sister," he said. "In spite of what you

say, you are going back on your word. You should have thought to fling dirt before you entered into a compact with me. However, I care nothing for all your threats. As you have said, I want money. Nothing else matters to me. So I will go to Winaupig and see this thing through."

"You certainly will have to do so. Andy shall drive you into town to-night, and I could find it in my heart to wish that I might never see your face again."

"Very well." Hervey laughed harshly. "As you wish. I accept your commands. See you as readily fulfil your part of the contract when the time comes. You do not hoodwink me again with impunity."

And so brother and sister parted. The girl walked on to the house, her feet dragging wearily over the dusty road. Hervey paused unawildely. His burning eyes, fixed with a look of bitter hatred, gazed after the slight figure of his sister, whose life he had so wantonly helped to wreck. Then he laughed cruelly and turned abruptly back on his tracks and returned once more to the harvesters.

Prudence gained the house and went straight to her room. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to straighten out the chaos of her thoughts. She heard the cheery voices of her mother and Alice talking in the kitchen. She heard the clatter of plates and dishes, and she knew that those two were washing up. But beyond that she noticed nothing, she did not even see the plump figure of Sarah Curridge approaching the house from the direction of Leoville.

Once in her own little room she flung herself into an arm chair and sat staring straight in front of her. Her paramount feeling was one of awful horror. The mystery was solved, and George Iradale was the murderer. The metal alarm clock ticked away upon the wicker top of her bureau and the sound pervaded the room with its steady throb. Her feelings, her thoughts, seemed to pulsate in concert with its rhythm. The words which expressed her dominant emotions hammered themselves into her brain with the steady precision of the ticking—

"George Iradale, the murderer of Leobe Grey!"

The moments passed, but time brought the girl no relief.

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All thought of the man who had told her of this thing had passed from her. This the fact remained. Now she sat with nerves tingling and white-gloved hands, a flush of blood mounted to her head, her brain became hot, and she seemed to be looking out on a red world. The ticking of the clock grew fainter and more distant. The room seemed to diminish in size, while the objects about her drew nearer and nearer. A sense of oppression was here, although she seemed to be gazing out over some great distance with everything around her in due perspective.

Mechanically she rose and opened the window. Then she returned to her chair with something of the action of an automaton.

And as she sat the blood seemed to recede from her brain and an icy dew broke out upon her forehead. She was numbed with a sort of paralysing numbness, and the measured beat of the clock no longer pounded out the words of her thought. Only her heart beat painfully, and she was conscious of a horrible void. Something was wrong with her but she was incapable of reaching what it was.

She moved, the chair creaked under her, and again thought flowed through her brain. It came with a rush, the deadly numbness had gone as quickly as it had come, and once more her face was white as parchment. Now she realised pain, bitter despair, helplessness in a sudden, overwhelming flood. She shrunk back into the chair as though to avoid physical blows which were being rained upon her by some unseen hand.

Presently she started up with a faint cry. She walked across the room and back again. She paused at the bureau, muttering—

"It can't be! It can't be!" she said to herself in an agony of terror. "Lennie is too good too honest. Ah."

Her love cried out for the man, but reason checked her while her heart tried to rush her into extravagant hopefulness. Lennie had admitted the smuggling. She had seen with her own eyes the danger at the graveyard. And therein lay the key to everything. Lennie had said so with his dying breath. But as this thought came to her it was chased away by her love in a fresh burst of fervour. She could not believe it. There must be some awful, some horrible mistake.

Slowly her mind steadied itself, the long years of calmness which she had spent amidst the profound peace of the prairie helped her. She gripped herself lest the dreadful thought of what she had heard should drive her to madness. She went over what she had been told with a keen examination. She listened to her own arguments for and against the man she loved. She went back to the time when Leslie had told her of his "coup." She remembered everything so well. She paused as she reflected her dead lover's anger at George's coming to the party. And for a moment, her heart almost stood still. She asked herself, had she misinterpreted his meaning? Had there been something underlying his expressed disapproval at George's coming which related to what he knew of his George's treachery, dealings at the ranch? Every word he had said came back to her. She remembered that he had finished up his protest with a broken sentence.

"And besides——"

There was a significance in those words now which she could not help dwelling upon. Then she put the thought from her as her faith in her lover reasserted itself. But the effort was a feeble one, her love was being overwhelmed by the damning evidence.

She moved restlessly from the bureau to the window. The curtained aperture looked out upon the far-reaching even fields, which were now only a mass of brown stubble. In the distance beyond the dyke, she could see the white strains of the traction-engine and the figures of many men working. The carts and racks were moving in the picture, but for all else the view was one of peaceful, unbroken calm.

Her mind passed on to the time when the party had broken up. She remembered how in searching for Fredair she had found the two men quarrelling, or something in that nature. Again Leslie had been on the verge of telling her something but the moment had gone by and he had kept silence. She tried to deny the significance of these things, but reason checked her, and her heart sank to zero. And she no longer tried to defend her lover.

Then came the recollection of that picnic. The screech-owls; the boats laden with their human freight moving

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suspiciously over the waters of the great lake. She thought of the graveyard and the ghastly procession. And all the time her husband was ordering and the protests of her heart slowly died out. If she had doubted Harvey's words all these things of which she now thought were facts evident to her own vision. The hard light in her eyes changed to the bright flash of anger. This man had come to her with his love, she reminded herself, and she had yielded to him all that she had power to bestow. The brown eyes grew darker until their glowing depths partially veiled those of her brother.

As the anger in her heart rose her pain increased, and she recoiled in horror at the thought that this man had dared to offer her his love while his hands were stained with black crime. At best he was a law-breaker, at the worst he was——

She paced her room with agitated steps. The blood rose to her head again, and she felt dizzy and dazed. What could she do? What must she do? She hoped for some one to whom she could tell all that was in her heart, but she could not speak of it, she dared not. She felt that she must be going mad. Through all her agony of mind she knew that she loved this man who was——a murderer.

She told herself that she hated him, and she knew that she lied to deceive herself. No, no, he was not guilty. He had not been proved guilty, and no man is guilty until he is proved so. Thoughts crowded thick and fast on her sorely taxed brain, and again and again her hands went up to her head with the action of one who is mentally distracted. But in spite of the conflict that raged within her the angry light in her eyes grew, and a look which was out of all keeping with the sweet face was slowly settling itself upon her features. Again she cried in her heart, "What shall I do?"

Suddenly a light broke through her darkness and revealed to her a definite course. This man must not be judged, at least by her, without a hearing. Why should she not go to him? Why not challenge him with the story? If he were the murderer perhaps he would strike her to the earth and add her to the list of his victims. She laughed bitterly. It would be good to die by his hand.



she thought. Under any circumstances life was not worth living. The thought fascinated her. Yes, she would do it. Then her spirit of justice rose and rebelled. No. He would then go unpunished. Lesar's death would remain unavenged. The murderer would have triumphed.

She thought long. She moved wildly about the room. And as the hours passed a demon seemed to come to her and take hold of her. It was the demon which looked out of her brother's eyes, and which now looked out of hers. He whispered to her, and her willing ears listened to all he said. Her heart, torn by conflicting passions, drank in the cruel promptings.

"Why not kill him? Why not kill him?" suggested the demon. "If he is guilty, kill him, and your life will not have been lived in vain. If he be a murderer it were but justice. You will have fulfilled your promise of vengeance. After that you could turn your hand against yourself."

And her heart echoed the question, "Why not?"

For nearly an hour she continued to pace her room. Yes, yes! Here was the right, she told herself. If he were the murderer she did not care to live. They should lie together, they should journey beyond together. She thought over all the details, and all the time the demon looked out of her eyes and jugged her with fresh arguments when her heart failed her. She knew where her brother kept his pistol. She would wait until he had set out for Winnipeg. Then, on the morrow, she would ride over to Lonely Ranch.

She nursed her anger, she encouraged it at every turn. And she longed for the morrow. But outwardly she grew calm. Only her eyes betrayed her. And they were not the eyes of perfect sanity. They glowed with a lurid fire, the fire which shone in the fierce, dark eyes of her brother.

## CHAPTER XVI

### AN SCENE FROM THE ALASKAN MOUNTAINS

Alice searched all over the farm for her friend. The last place in which she thought of looking was the little bedroom the two girls shared. Here at length she arrived, and a shock awaited her.

Prudence was sitting beside the window. She was gazing out at the bare, harvested fields, nor did she turn at her friend's approach. It was not until Alice spoke that she looked round.

"Here you are, Prue! Why what-*ever* is the matter?" she exclaimed, as she noted the grey pallor of the face before her, the drawn lines about the mouth, the terrible burning eyes. "You prove to *me* you are ill, and you never told me a word about it. I have been looking every where for you. It is tea time. What is it, dear?"

"Do I look ill?" Prudence asked wearily. She passed her hand across her forehead. She was almost dazed. Then she went up as she turned again to the window. "I'm all right, my head is aching, that's all. I don't think I want any tea. The next moment she was all alertness. "Has *He* ever returned from the fields?"

"Hervey? Yes, why?" He returned and gave away again, gone into Winnipeg. He nearly frightened poor mother Heflav out of her wits. (You are all of a sudden) and declared he must hurry off to Winnipeg at once, and he wanted Andy to drive him. You know his way. He wouldn't give any explanation. He was like a lion to his mother. My fingers were just itching to slap his face. But come along, dear, you must have some tea. It'll do your head good."

While she was speaking Alice's eyes never left her friend's face. There was something about Prudence's expression she didn't like. Her mind at once reverted to thoughts of fever and stroke and such things, but she said nothing that might cause alarm. She merely pointed when the other shook her head.

Eventually her persuasions prevailed.

"Mother Hephzy's letting away down-stairs and Sarah is backing her up. The long-suffering Mary has been catching it in consequence. So come along and be your most cheerful self, Prue. The poor old dears must be humoured."

And Alice with gentle insistence led her companion down to the parlour.

"And where, miss, have you been all this precious time?" asked Mrs. Malling, when the two girls reached the parlour. "Sleeping, I'll be bound, to judge by them spectacles around your eyes. There's no git up about young folk now a-days," she went on, turning to Sarah. "Six hours' sleep for healthy-minded women, I says; not an hour more nor an hour less. Sister Emma was allus one o' them for her ey-esta." Then she turned back to Prudence. "Maybe she learned you, my girl."

"I haven't been sleeping, mother," Prudence protested, taking her place at the table. "I don't feel very well."

"Ah, you don't say so," exclaimed the old lady, all anxiety at once. "An' why didn't you tell me before? Now maybe you've got a touch o' the sun?"

"Have you been faint and giddy?" asked Sarah, fixing her quiet eyes upon the girl's face.

"No, I don't think so. I've got a headache—nothing more."

"Ah, cold bath and lemon soda," observed her mother practically.

"Tea, and be left alone," suggested Sarah.

"Nature designs all human life, but in the making suggests the care which best is for the taking."

Her steady old eyes seemed able to penetrate mere outward signs.

"Quite right, 'Aunt' Sarah," said Alice decidedly. "Leave the nostrums and quackeries alone. Prue will be all right after a nice cup of tea. Now, mother Hephzy, one of your best for the invalid, and, please, I'll have some more ham."

"That you shall, you flighty harum-scarum. And to think o' the likes o' you dictating to me about nostrums and physicings," replied the farm-wife, with a comfortable laugh. "I'll soon be having Mary teaching me to toss a buckwheat 'slap-jack.' Now see an' out from

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the sides o' that barn where the curin's primest. I do allow as the barns didn't curv just so, last winter. Folks at my board must have of the best."

"I never knew any one to get anything else here," laughed Alice. Then she turned her head sharply and sat listening.

Mrs. Malling looked over towards the window. Prudence silently sipped her tea, keeping her eyes lowered as much as possible. She knew that, in spite of their talk, these kindly people were worried about her, and she tried hard to relieve their anxiety.

"Some one for us," said Alice, as the sound of horse's hoofs came in through the open window.

"Some one from Lakeville, I expect," said Mrs. Malling, making a guess.

"That's George Iredale's horse," said Sarah, who had detected the sound of a pacer's gait.

Prudence looked up in a startled, frightened way. Sarah was looking directly at her. She made no further comment aloud, but contented herself with a quiet mental note.

"Something wrong," she thought, "and it's to do with him. Poor child, poor child! Maybe she's fretting herself because——"

Her reflections were abruptly broken off as the sound of a man's voice hailing at the front door penetrated to the parlour.

"Any one in?" cried the voice; and instantly Alice sprang to her feet.

"It's Robb!" she exclaimed. There was a clatter as her chair fell back behind her, she nearly fell over it, reached the door, and the next moment those in the parlour heard the sound of joyous exclamations proceeding from the hall.

Prudence's expression was a world of relief. Her mother was overjoyed.

"That's real good. Bring him in! Bring him in. Miss Thoughtless! Don't keep him there a phylandering when there's good fare in the parlour!"

"Love feeds on kindness, we need no sweet lay,  
Meaning the love of you, not of to-day."

murmured Sarah, with a pensive smile, while she turned expectantly to greet the visitor.

Radiant, her face shining with conscious happiness,

Alice led her fiancé into the room. And Robb Chillingwood found himself sitting before the farm-wife's generous board almost before he was aware of it. While he was being served he had to face a running fire of questions from at least, three of the ladies present.

Robb was a cheerful soul and ever ready with a pleasant laugh. This snatched holiday from a stress of underpaid work was like a "bunk" to a school-boy. It was more delightful to him by reason of the knowledge that he would have to pay up for it afterwards with extra exertions and overtime work.

"You didn't tell us when you were coming," said Alice.

"Didn't know myself. Thought I'd ride over from Iredale's place on spec'."

"And you're come from there now?" asked Mrs. Malling.

Prudence looked up eagerly.

"Yes, I've just bought all his stock for a Scotch client of mine."

"Scotch?" Sarah turned away with a motion of disgust.

"What, has George sold all his beasts at last?" exclaimed the farm-wife.

"Why, yes. Didn't you know? He's giving up his ranch."

Robb looked round the table in surprise. There was a pause. Then Mrs. Malling broke it—

"He has spoken of it hinted. But we wasn't expecting it so soon. He's made his pile."

"Yes, he must have done so," said Robb readily. "The price he parted with his cattle to me for was ridiculous. I shall make a large profit out of my client. It'll all help towards furnishing. Al," he went on, turning to his fiancée,

"I'm so glad you are doing well now, Robb," the girl replied, with a happy smile.

"Yes." Then the man turned to Mrs. Malling. "We're going to get married this fall. I hope Alice has been learning something of housekeeping" with a laugh.

"Why, yes. Alice knows a great deal more than she reckons to let on, I guess," said the farm-wife, with a fat chuckle.

Prudence now spoke for the first time since Robb's arrival. She looked up sulkily, and, though she tried hard to speak conversationally, there was a slightly eager ring in her voice.

"When is George Iredale going to leave the ranch?"

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Robb turned to her at once.

"I can't say. Not yet, I should think. He seems to have made no preparations. Besides, I've got to see him again in a day or two."

"Then you will stay out here?" asked Alice eagerly.

"Well, no. I'll shake his head with a cynical expression of charity. I can't be the least afraid. But I'll come over here when I'm in the neighborhood, if possible. That's Mrs. Walling's May 19."

"Why certainly," said the farmer, "with characteristic politeness. If you come to this district without as much as a look in here, well, you can just pass right along for the future."

When the meal was over the old lady rose from the table.

"Alice," said she, "you stay right here. Sarah and I'll clear away. Prudence my girl, get up and get your rest. Maybe you'll feel better later on. Come along, Sarah, the young folks can get on comfortably without us for once."

Prudence made no attempt to do as her mother suggested. She moved about the room helping with the work. Then the two old ladies adjourned to the kitchen. Robb and Alice had moved over to the well worn sofa at the far end of the room, and Prudence took up her position at the open window. She seemed to have no thought of leaving the lovers together; in fact it seemed as though she had forgotten their existence altogether. She stood staring out over the little front garden with hard, unchanging eyes. Even her expression it is doubtful if she saw what her eyes looked upon. Her thoughts were of other matters that concerned only herself and another.

The low tones of the lovers sounded autonomously through the room. They too, were now wrapt in their own concerns, and had forgotten the presence of the girl at the window. They had so much to say and so little time in which to say it. For Robb had to make Annex that night.

The cool August evening was drawing on. The threatening gang was returning from the fields, and the purple haze of sundown was rising above the eastern horizon. Prudence did not move. Her hands were clasped before her, her pale face might have been of carved stone. There was only the faintest sign of life about her, and that was the steady rise and fall of her breast.

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A cool breeze rattled in through the open window and set the curtains moving. Then all became still again. Two birds squabbed viciously amongst the branches of a blue gum in the little patch of a garden. But the silence came was still directed towards the horizon. She saw nothing, she felt nothing but the pain which her own thoughts brought her.

Suddenly the sound of something moving outside became audible. There was the noisy yawn of some large animal rising from its rest. Then came the slow heavy patter of the creature's feet. Niche approached the window. His fierce looking head stood out above the sill. His greenish eyes looked up submissively at the still figure framed in the opening. His ears were bent attentively. There was no lively motion of his straight, black tail, but his appearance was undoubtedly expressive of some sort of well meaning canine regard. Whether the dog understood and sympathized with the girl at the window it would have taken something more than a keen observer to have said. But in his strange, unworldly fashion he was certainly straggling to connect something to this girl from whom he was accustomed to receive nothing but kindness.

For some moments he stood thus, quite still. His unkempt body rose and fell under his wire coat. He was a vast beast, and the wolf grey and black of his coloring was horrible suggestive of his ancestry. Presently he lifted one great paw to the window. Barring his snout upon his only serviceable hind leg, he stretched himself and stood with both front feet upon the sill, and pushed his nose against the girl's dress. She awoke from her reverie at the touch, and her hands unclasped, and she slowly caressed the beast's head. The animal seemed to appreciate the attention for with his powerful paws, he drew himself further into the room.

The girl offered no objection. She paid no heed to what he was doing. Her hand merely rested on his head, and she thought no more about him. Finding himself unrebuffed Niche made further efforts, then suddenly he became aware of the other occupants of the room. Quick as a flash his nose was directed towards the old sofa on which they were seated, and his eyes like two balls of phosphorescent light, glared in their direction. He

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because uncertainty of mind. It seemed as though he were uncertain of something.

He was schooled to resent the presence of those in, but the reason of the odd wariness had checked any hostile demonstration beyond a stare, his glance was half-afraid.

The direction of several dark lines of attention and she looked over to where Prudence was staring. It was then she encountered the unending stare of the hound's wicked eyes. The sight thrilled her for a moment, and could she express a slight shudder. She judged her own passion and drew her attention without speaking. Right faced and the direction of her gaze and a moment followed what he perceived the strange appearance.

He could see no thinking's head, the rest of the creature was hidden behind the window curtain, and its appearance was suggested the great body and powerful limbs which remained unswayed. To him it there was a suggestion of hell about the cruel hunter of the northern eyes.

At last he broke into a little nervous laugh.

"My Jove," he said, "I thought for the moment I'd got you, too, what? The brute looks like the devil does it? What is it? Whose?"

With that remark Alice said to her friend:

"Let North come in, Prue, she is!" "That is," doubtfully, "if you think it's safe." Then she turned to North. "He is so savage that I'm afraid of him. And with Prue here I think he is all right, he is devoted to her."

At the sound of the girl's voice Prudence turned back from the window like one awakening from a dream. Her eyes still had a far away look in them, and though she had heard the voice it seemed doubtful as to whether she had taken the meaning of the words. For a moment her eyes rested on Alice's face, then they dropped to the dog of her side, but Alice was forced to repeat her question before the other moved. Then, as silence she stopped back and summoned the dog to her with an encouraging chirp. North moved on a small trotting. There was a creak and a scraping of sharp claws upon the woodwork, then the animal stood in the room. And he attitude as he eyed the two seated upon the sofa was as plainly as possible, "Well, which one is it to be first?"

Right left away. Alice was doubtfully alarmed at the dog's truculent appearance.



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But the tension was relieved a moment later by the brute's own strange behaviour. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, Neeche plumped down upon his hind quarters. His prickled ears drooped, and his two fore paws began to beat a sort of tattoo upon the floor. Then followed a motion when, tremulous and blanching, and the great head moved from side to side with that curious movement which only dogs use to express their gladness. Then the strange, the weird beast went further. Down he threw himself full length upon the floor and grovelled ecstatically, whining as he scraping the boards in a perfect fervour of abject delight.

Robb laughed hard at the dog. Then he laughed and turned to Anne.

"What is the creature's name? I didn't catch it."

"Neeche," she replied.

Robb held out his hand encouragingly and called the dog by name. The animal continued to squirm but did not offer to come nearer. Every now and then its head was turned back, and the green eyes looked up into Prudence's face. At last Robb ceased his efforts. His bluntnesses were ineffectual beyond increasing the dog's effusive display.

"A husky," he said, looking across at Prudence. "A bad dog to have about the house. He reminds me of the animals we had up north in our dog team. They're devils to handle and as fierce as wild cats. We had one just like him. Unusually big brute. He was our 'wheeler.' The most vicious dog of the lot. The resemblance is striking. By Jove!" he went on reminiscently "he was a sulky, cantankerous cuss. His name was 'Sitting Bull,' after the renowned Sioux Indian chief. We had to be very careful of the other dogs on account of his 'scrapping' propensities. He killed one poor beast. I think we nicknamed him rather appropriately. He was affectionately dubbed 'Bully'."

As Robb pronounced the name he held out his hand again and flicked his fingers. The dog rose from his grovelling posture and came eagerly forward, wagging his lank tail. He rubbed his nose against the man's hand and slowly licked the sun-tanned skin.

Robb's brows drew together in a pucker of deep perplexity. He looked the animal over long and earnestly,

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and slowly there crept into his eyes an expression of wondering astonishment. He was interrupted in his inspection by the girl at his side.

"Why, he is treating you like an old friend, Robb."

The man sat gazing down upon the wiry coat of the beast.

"Yes," he said shortly. Then he looked over at Prudence. "Yours?" he went on.

The girl shook her head.

"No, he belongs to Hervey."

"Um! I wonder where he got him from," in a meditative tone.

"Somewhere out in the wilds of the Yukon," put in Alice.

"Ah! The Yukon." And Robb's face was serious as he turned towards the window and looked out at the creeping shadows of evening.

There was a pause. Prudence was thinking of anything but the subject of Robb's inquiries. Alice was curious, but she forbore to question. She had heard her lover's account of his misadventure in the Alaskan hills, but she saw no connection between the hound and that disastrous affair. But the man's thoughts were hard at work. Presently he rose to depart.

He bade Prudence good-bye and moved towards the door. The dog remained where he had been standing and looked after him. At the door Robb hesitated, then he turned and looked back.

"Poor old Bully," he said.

With a bound the dog was at his side. Then the man turned away, and, accompanied by Alice, left the room. In the passage he paused, and Alice saw an expression on his face she had never seen before. He was nervous and excited, and his eyes shone in the half light.

"Al," he said slowly, "I know that dog. And his name is Bully. Don't say anything to anybody. Hervey may be able to tell me something of those who robbed us up in the hills. But on no account must you say anything to him, leave it to me. I shall come here again—soon. Good-bye, little woman."

That evening as Robb Chillingwood rode back to Ainsley, he thought of many things, but chiefly he reviewed the details of that last disastrous journey when he and Grey had traversed the snow-fields of Alaska together.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE LAST OF LONELY RANCE

There are moments which come in all lives when calm reflection is powerless to influence the individual acts, when calmness, even in the most phlegmatic natures, is impossible, when a tide of impulse sweeps us on, giving us not even so much as a breathless momentary pause in which to consider the result of our headlong career. We blunder on against every jagged obstacle, lacerated and bleeding, jolting cruelly from point to point, whither our passions irresistibly drive us. It is a blind, reckless journey, from which there is no escape when the tide sets in. We see our goal ahead, and we fondly believe that because it is ahead we must come to it. We do not consider the awful road we travel, nor the gradual exhaustion which is overtaking us. We do not realize that we must fall by the wayside for lack of strength, nor even, if our strength be sufficient to carry us on to the end, do we ask ourselves, shall we be able to draw aside out of the raging torrent when our goal is reached? or shall we be swept on to the yawning Beyond where, for evermore, we must continue to struggle hopelessly to return? Once give passion unchecked sway, and who can say what the end will be?

It was at such a moment in her life at which Prudence had arrived. Her mind was set upon an object which absorbed all her faculties, all her brain, all her feelings. Had she been able to pause, even for one moment, reason must have asserted itself and she would have understood the folly of what she was doing. But that moment was denied her. All the latent passions of a strong nature had been let loose and she was swept on by their irresistible tide. She believed that she was the appointed

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a Roger of the man she had once loved, and that this day's affliction would be a crime, the stain of which nothing could wipe out, beside that he confronted, challenged, and—

And so she came to Lonely Ranch on her self-imposed errand of justice.

The very thought was not in the house when she came. The valley seemed to be devoid of life as she rode up. But the solitude was almost instantly broken by the appearance of Chanta from the region of the barn. She dismounted from a perch of her master and passed into the kitchen sitting room to await his return.

She was restless and her nerves were strung to a great tension. Her eyes still shone with that peculiar light which ever warned to look out of her brother's. There was no ring in the set of her mouth. Her countenance disfigured the sweetness which usually characterized her beautiful features.

She stood before the window looking out upon the shadow bathed valley. She saw before her the dark wall of foliage which rose to the heights of the front hill. Not a single bird was about only was there a rustling sound which disturbed the unbroken forest of pines. She turned abruptly from the view as though she could not bear the solitude which was thus made so apparent. She crossed over to where the landscape stood against the wall and glanced in through the glass doors. But she comprehended nothing of what she saw. She was thinking, thinking, and her mind was in a tumult of hysterical horror. And she was listening too, listening for a sound

any sound other than that which the wind made. Mechanically she came over to the table and leaned against it in an effort of abstraction. She shivered, she stood up to steady herself and she shivered again. And all the time the forward eyes glanced in these beautiful oval setting, the lips were drawn inward, and there remained only a sharp defined line to mark the sweet mouth. Presently her lips parted and she muttered them with her tongue. A fever seemed to be upon her, and mouth and throat were parched.

Suddenly the sound for which she waited came. She dashed eagerly to the window and saw Chanta pass round

in the direction of the barn. Then she saw the burly figure of the man she was awaiting appear in the clearing fronting the house.

George Iredale came along at a robust gait. He was clad in mole-skin riding breeches, much stained with clay, as though he had been digging; a soft shirt, the sleeves of which were rolled up above the elbow; his Stetson hat was adjusted at the correct angle upon his head, and he wore a pair of tan-coloured field boots, much smeared with the signs of toil. He came rapidly towards the house. There was nothing furtive, nothing guilty about this man's bearing; he came readily to meet his visitor, and his appearance was the confident bearing of a man who has little to fear.

She saw him look towards the window where she stood, and his smile of welcome set her nerves tingling with a sensation she failed to understand. Her hand went round to the pocket of her linen riding skirt and remained there. She heard his step in the hall, she heard him approach and turn the door-handle. As he came into the room she faced him.

"Why, Prudence, this is a delightful——" he began. But she interrupted him coldly.

"One moment," she said, and her voice was hoarse with the dryness of her throat. "I have not come over for any visit of pleasure but strictly upon a matter of — of — business. There are some explanations which we both need to make, but more especially you."

"Yes."

Iredale was gazing earnestly into the face before him. He was trying to fathom the meaning of her coldness. For the moment he wondered, then, slowly, he began to understand that Hervey had been at work.

"You got my note," he said, choosing to ignore the result of his observations. "My delay in calling at the farm was unavoidable. I am in the midst of disposing of my ranch. I had not expected that I should have been called upon to do so so soon. I beg that you will forgive me what must seem an unwarrantable delay."

Prudence's nerves were so strung that she felt as though she could strike him for his calm words. Her condition demanded the opposition of passion equal to her own.

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His confusion maddened her. So long had she dwelt upon the accusation Hervey had brought against him that she believed in this man's guilt. The existence of her own errors had militated against him, and now she steered herself in an armour of unbelief. But in spite of herself the dictates of her heart were struggling hard to find the points of her armour. Now were the struggles lessened now that she stood confronting him. His confusion, though maddening to her, was not without effect. The moral influence he wielded was great.

She backed to the table, then she plunged into the subject of her mission without further preamble. Her eyes stared straight into his, and her voice sounded incisively in the stillness of the room.

"I little knew the man whom I was listening to when he offered me his life, nor had I an idea of how near I was to the man who repeated the words which have appeared in the paper—the words which were the last words Carey ever uttered. What must have been your feelings when I told you that I knew their author to be a murderer?" Then, with a shaking lip, she said: "But your feelings must have long since been dead—dead as the poor creature you so wantonly sent to his reckoning. The time has come for you to defend yourself—that is if defence you can offer. No flimsy excuse or extenuation will cover you. Even the Scriptures teach us that the penalty is 'a life for a life.' Yours is the hand that struck Leach down, and now you must face the consequences of your wanton act."

It took a quiet eye never attempted to avoid the girl's direct gaze, nor did he flinch as the accusation fell from her lips. Never was he more alert, never more gently disposed towards this half-demented creature than at that moment. He recognised the hand that had been at work, and he laid no blame upon her. His feelings were of sorrow—sorrow for the woman he loved, and sorrow for himself. But his thoughts were chiefly for her. He knew, as she had said, that his time had come.

"So Hervey has been to you to sell the discovery which I rejected at the price he asked. He told you that I was a smuggler; that the announcement in the paper was true. And did he tell you that I was the murderer of

Leslie Grey? Or did your heart prompt you to that conclusion?"

The girl supported herself against the table with one hand, and the other was still in the pocket behind her. Fred or noted these things without moving his eyes from her face.

"Hervey told me the facts and the inevitable proof they bore. But was his statement exaggerated? My own reason told me that."

The man sighed. He had hoped that the work had been only of the brother's doing. He had hoped that she had come bearing Hervey's accusation and not her own.

"Go on," he said.

"I know you for what you really are, George Fredale. And now I have come to you to give you the chance of defending yourself. No man must be condemned without a hearing. Neither shall you. The evidence against you is overwhelming. I can see no escape for you. But speak if you have anything to say in your defence, and I will listen. I charge you with the murder of Leslie Grey."

Just for one brief moment Fredale felt a shiver pass through his body. The cry that was of the girl's voice, the stern, vivid, passionate words filled him with a terror unspeakable. Then he pulled himself together. He came on his defence before the one person in the world from whose condemnation he shrunk. He did not answer at once. He wished to make no mistake. When at last he spoke his words came slowly as though he weighed well each syllable before he gave utterance.

"With one exception all that Hervey has doubtless said of me is true. I am a murderer. I inspired that line in the paper, but I am no murderer. Leslie Grey's life was so tied to me at the time if only for the reason that he was your affianced husband. I loved you at that time as I have loved you for years, and all my thoughts and wishes were for your happiness. It would have made you happy to have married Grey, therefore I wished that you should marry him. I am quite unchanged. I will tell you now what neither you nor Hervey knows, even though it makes my case look blacker. I knew that Grey was on my track. I knew that he had discovered my secret. Now he had done so I cannot say. He quarrelled

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with me, and, in the heat of his anger, told me of his intentions. It was late one night at a card party at your house, and just before he was so foully murdered. No doubt you, or any right-minded person for that matter, will say that this evidence only clinches the case against me. But, in spite of it, I assert my innocence. Amongst my many sins the crime Hervey charges me with "so purposely avoided associating the charge with her—" is not numbered. Can I hope that you will believe me?"

The gentle tones in which the burly man spoke, the earnest fearfulness which looked out from his quiet eyes, gave infinite weight to all he said. Prudence shook her head slowly, but the fire in her eyes was less bright, and the voice of her own heart crying out began to make itself heard in the midst of her chaotic thought.

She tried to stiffen herself for the task she had undertaken, but the result was not all she sought. Still, she replied coldly—

"How can I believe with all the black evidence against you? You, in all this region, were the one man interested in Leslie's death. His life meant penitentiary to you, his death meant liberty. Your own words tell me that. How can I believe such a denial as you now make? Tell me, have you no proof to offer? Account for the day on which Leslie met his death, prove your movements upon that day."

The girl's denial of belief was belied by the eagerness in her voice. For one brief instant a flash of hope rose in her. She saw a loophole for her lover. She longed to believe him. But the hope died down, leaving her worse distracted for its coming.

For Fredale did not speak, and his face assumed a look of gloom.

"Ah, you cannot. you cannot," she went on hysterically. "I might have known, I did know." A world of passion again leapt into her eyes. Then something of the woman broke through her anger, and a heart-breaking petulance mingled in her voice. "Oh, why, why did you do this thing? Why did you stain your hands with such a crime as murder? What would his living have meant to you? At worst the penitentiary. Was it worth it to destroy then the last chance of your immortal



soul? Oh, God! And to think of it! A murderer!" Then the fierce anger became dominant once more. "Hail you shall not escape. Your crime shall be expiated as far as human crimes can be expiated. The gall awaits you, George Irvine, and your story shall be told to the world. You shall hang unless you can give to judge and jury a better denial than you have given to me." She suddenly broke off. A whistling indrawn breath startled the man to face her. She gazed round her wildly, she had remembered what she had come for. She had forgotten when she had talked of "judge and jury." Her face assumed a ghastly hue at the recollection. Her eyes alone still told of the madness that possessed her.

Not was Irvine with out an uneasy feeling at what he saw—that catch of breath—that hunted look as she gazed about the room. Intuition served him in the moment of crisis. What was the meaning? Why was that hand concealed in her dress? There was only one possible answer to such questions, and he read the answer aright.

"Prudence," he said in his deep musical voice, whilst his keen eyes riveted her attention, "I can prove my innocence of the crime you charge me with. Listen to me patiently and I will tell you how. Do not let your anger drive you to any rash act, which might bring you—life-long regret."

The girl made a sharp ejaculation. But she did not attempt to interrupt him.

"I can prove that I was not within three hundred miles of this place on the day of Leslie's death, the man went on. 'That I was in a city to the west of here distributing'—bitterly—"my wares. I can prove all this to you. And I intend that before you leave me to-day you shall be a witness to my innocence, even against all prejudice. But before judge and jury it will be different—very different." He sighed. "There I cannot prove my innocence, for to do so would be to betray my comrades—those who have trusted with me and trusted me—and send them to the penal servitude which also awaits me." His eyes had become reflective. He seemed to be talking to himself now rather than to the woman before him. "No, I cannot save myself at such a cost. Even to escape the gallows I will not play the part of Judas."

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The woman made no reply. She stood staring at him with all that was best in her shining in her eyes. She was trying to follow his every word and to take his meaning and the one thought which dominated her whole mind was his expressed ability to prove his innocence to her.

He seemed to awake from some melancholy reverie, and again his eyes sought hers.

"Do you wish me to prove my innocence?"

"Yes; you must—you shall!"

The girl moved from the table; and for the first time during the interview her hand was removed from the pocket in her skirt. Hope filled the heart in which but now the fires of hell had seemed to burn. She drank in his words with a soul-consuming thirst. The proof! That was what she required.

Freddie went on with grave gentleness.

"The proof is in here." He moved to the book-case and opened a secret room in the back of it. "In this cupboard."

He produced a pile of books and brought them to the table. Picking out one he opened it at the date of Frey's death. It was a diary. He read out the entries for the entire week, all of which bore out his testimony. Every one was dated at a different town or village, and related to his sales of opium. He then opened another book and showed the entries of his sales and the prices. He went through the whole pile, book after book, and all of them bore out his statement as to his whereabouts. Then he produced several contracts, these were deeds between himself and various traders, and were dated at the towns at which they were signed. Book by book and paper by paper he passed on to Prudence for her scrutiny, drawing her attention to the corroboration in the evidence. There could be no doubt as to the genuineness of these facts, and the girl's last shadowy doubts of his innocence evaporated before the overwhelming detail. The hope which had filled her heart was now replaced by a triumphant joy. This man had shown her had convinced her, and she wanted nothing more at that moment.

She looked up into his face, hoping to see a reflection of her own happiness in it. But there was no happiness there. His face was calm, but the melancholy had deepened in his eyes. What she now came like an toy

doubts to her, and the happy expression died upon her lips. She suddenly remembered that he had said he could not use this evidence to publicly declare his innocence.

"But—" she began.

He shook his head. He knew that she wished to protest. But a moment they looked into each other's eyes. Then the woman, the weaker, broke down under the strain. Tears came to her eyes, and she poured out all the pent-up grief of her hours of misery.

"Oh, George," she cried, "can you ever forgive my wickedness? I ought never to have believed. My heart told me that you were innocent, but the evidence—oh, the evidence I could see no help in. Everything pointed to you—you. And I, wretch that I am, I believed." And the girl sobbed as though her heart would break. Iradale made no attempt to soothe her, he felt that it would be good for her to weep. She leant against the table, and after a while her sobs quietened. Then the man touched her upon the shoulder.

"Don't cry. Prue, my heart bleeds for you when I listen to your sobs. You're not to blame for believing me guilty. Twelve jurymen will shortly do the same, and who can blame them?" He shrugged. "I must face the 'in me and take my chance.' And now, child," he added, his hand still resting upon her shoulder, and smiling down upon her from his superior height, "give me that which you have concealed in your pocket. We will throw it away."

Prudence sprang up and moved beyond his reach.

"No, not I can't! Don't ask me. Spare me the shame of it. As you love me, George, don't ask me for it."

"As you will, dear, I merely wished to rid ourselves of an ugly presence. While we are together, and it may not be for long now—nothing should come between us, least of all that."

The girl's tears had dried. She looked over at her lover. His compelling influence was upon her. She paused irresolute—then she plunged her hand into her pocket and drew forth a large revolver.

"Here take it. Take it and do what you like with it." Then she laughed bitterly. "You know me as I am now. I brought that to shoot you with, and afterwards to shoot myself. You see, I am a murderer at heart." And she smiled bitterly.

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Iredale took the weapon and placed it in his boot-case. Then he came to the girl's side and put his arm tenderly about her shoulders.

"Forget it, child, forget it as you would a hideous dream. Your feelings were forced upon you by well through my wretched doings. That which I have done to gain wealth has brought only what might have been expected in its train. No work of evil is without its sting and as is always the case that sting seeks out the most sensitive part of its victim. The chastisement for my wrongdoing has been inflicted with cruel cunning for you. Prue have been made to suffer, thus is my punishment a hundredfold greater."

He drew her to him as he spoke and gently smoothed her dark hair. Under the influence of his touch and the sound of his voice the girl calmed. She nestled close to his side and for a moment abandoned herself to the delight of being with him. But her thoughts would not remain idle for long. Suddenly she released herself and moved to arm's length from him.

"George" she said in a tone of suppressed eagerness "they cannot try you for murder. You will tell them. You will show them all these. For my sake for the sake of all your friends, you will not let them run down you. Oh you can't allow it. Think" she went on, more passionately, "no men would willingly let you be declared guilty when they know you to be innocent. It must not be."

Iredale gave no outward sign. He had turned his face away and was gazing in the direction of the window. His reflective eyes looked out upon the valley, but his resolve was written plainly in them.

"Do not tempt me, Prue," he said quietly. "Were I to do otherwise than I have resolved and obtained an acquittal thereby I should live a life of utter regret. I should despise myself. I should breathe my own shadow. Nothing could be more revolting to me than the man who plays the part of a traitor and were I that man life would be impossible to me. Think of it only for one moment, sweetheart, and your own good heart will tell you how impossible is that which you ask me to do. It cannot be. All the world would despise me. But even so its utmost separation would be nothing compared with my own

feelings at the thought that I had saved myself by such methods." He withdrew his hand from her embrace. "No, when the time comes and I am forced to stand my trial for Love's murder I shall face it. Not shall I betray my friends by one single word. And, too, when that time comes there will not remain our single train of the traffic which has hitherto been part of my very existence. There shall be no possible chance of discovery for those who have trusted me. Your brother Hervey will never hold his hand. I know that. I realized that when he left me after seeking blackmail. His vindictive nature will see this through. And perhaps I would rather have it so. It will then be settled once and for all. I may get off, but I fear that it will be otherwise."

At the mention of her brother's name Prudence started and the blood reddened from her anxious face, leaving it ghastly in its pain. She had forgotten that he was even now on his way to Winnipeg for the express purpose of denouncing Iradale. For one instant she shook like an aspen. Then she recovered herself. What was to be done? She tried to think. This matter of Hervey was of her doing. She had driven him to it, urged him to it. Now she realized the full horror of what her foolish credulity had led her into. It had been in her power to stay his hand at least to draw his fangs. Now it was too late. Suddenly she turned upon her lover in one final appeal. At that moment it seemed the only chance of saving him.

"George, there is a way out of it all, one last resource if you will only listen to me. You love me even in spite of the way I have wronged you. You belong to me if only by reason of our love. You have no right to throw your life away when you are innocent. God knows I honour you for your decision not to betray your companions. If it were possible, I love you more than ever. But the man would be as great to throw your life away for such a shadow as it would be to deliver your friends up to justice. You can save yourself, you must. The border is near. We are right on it. Surely the way you have brought the Chinese into the country should provide an exit for us. Oh, my poor love, will you not listen to me? Will you not give me the life I crave? George, let us go—together."

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Her words came passionately. She had stepped forward and placed her two brown hands upon his great shoulders, and her dark earnest eyes gazed at him up into his.

The temptation was a sore one now, the man bowed it hard to resist. He experienced a sudden rush of blood to the brain. His body seemed to be on fire. He was pulsating with a mad passion. The thought of what she might do was near to overtopping his sternest resolve. To go with her. To have her ever and only his guide. The thought was maddening. Surely he had never realized until that moment how deeply he loved this woman. But his strong nature came to his rescue at last. The passion had done its work as swiftly as it had risen and left him cold and collected.

He gazed down into the brown eyes once so kindly, once so loving, and his answer came in a tone so gentle that the girl felt that whatever the future might hold for them, this moment had been worth living for.

"No, no sweetheart. A flight even though you would be my companion. We have one another dear, and for that very fact I could never allow myself to remain under this cloud. At all costs we will have the matter cleared. I owe it to you, to those at the farm, and to myself."

The girl's hands dropped to her sides and she turned away. Then on the verge of her melancholy she once again sat down.

"Oh, God," she cried. And with that sob came the revelation flash which answered the question she had so repeatedly asked herself. She turned back to her lover, and the agonized expression of her face had changed, and in her eyes was the eager light of enlightenment. Instantly she saw the change, but did not grasp at its meaning. He felt that she must no longer remain there.

"Child, I want you to go back to the farm and tell them of the agreement that has been freely signed for me. Tell them all the circumstances of it. Tell them that I have clearly convinced you of my innocence. But as you love me, I charge you not to reveal the manner in which it was done. Tell your mother that I shall come over to-morrow, and she shall hear the whole story from my own lips. I wish to do this that she may hear me sooner before she reads of what must happen in the papers. After that I shall go into Winnipeg and get the law in motion. I will clear myself or otherwise. But on

your honour you must promise that all I have shown you to-day remains a secret between us."

Prudence listened intently to all he said, but a quiet look of resolve slowly crept into her eyes.

"I promise," she said, and Iredale thanked her with a look.

There was the briefest of pauses; then she went on—

"On one condition"

"What do you mean?"

Iredale looked his surprise.

"Now you must hear me, George," she went on eagerly.

"You have charged me with this thing. You must abide by my time. A day more or less can make little difference to you."

"But I wish to give myself up before others can make the charge."

"Just so. And in the meantime I want your promise not to come to the farm until the"—she paused to make a swift mental calculation—"day after to-morrow at four o'clock in the afternoon."

"Tell me your reason."

"That is my own." The girl was smiling now. Then she again became excited. "Promise, promise, promise! There is no time to lose. Even now I fear we are too late."

Iredale looked dubiously at her. Suddenly he saw her face darken.

"Promise!" she demanded almost fiercely, "or I will not abide by my promise to you."

"I promise."

An expression of relief came into Prudence's eyes, and she stepped towards him and looked up into his face.

"Good-bye, George, dearest."

The man suddenly clasped her in a bear-like embrace and rained passionate, burning kisses on her upturned lips. Then quietly she released herself. She stood away from him holding one of his great hands in both of hers.

"Quick! Now my horse."

Iredale departed, and Prudence was left alone. She stood looking after him thinking, thinking.

"Can I do it?" she asked herself.

Damascus City was the nearest telegraph station. It lay nearly thirty-five miles due west of Owl Foot. It was merely a grain station for the district and in no sense

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a village. She must make that point and so intercept Hervey with a telegraphic message. It was her one chance. In spite of her lover she would buy Hervey a glimpse, and trust to the future to set the rest straight. She was strong and her horse was good. She must reach the office before it was closed at six o'clock that evening. She estimated it up, she had just three hours in which to cover the distance. She looked out of the window. The wind was blowing from the east—that was good; it would ease the horse. She looked up at the sky, there were a few clouds crudding westwards.

"Yes, I'll do it," she said at last, "if it kills poor Kitty."

A moment later Iredale returned with the mare. The girl waited not a second. Her lover assisted her into the saddle reluctantly. He did not approve this sudden activity on the part of the girl. When she had settled herself she bent down, and their lips met in one long, passionate kiss.

"Good-bye George."

The man waved his adieu. His heart was too full to speak. She swung her mare round and galloped down the valley to the north. Her object was to clear the valley and then turn off to the west on the almost deserted trail to Hamude.

Iredale looked after her until the sound of the mare's hoofs died away in the distance. He was filled with wonder at her strange request and her hurried departure. But his speculations brought him to no definite conclusion, and he turned abruptly and called to his man, Chintz.

The man hurried from the stable.

"We have been a little delayed. Is everything ready?"

Iredale looked up at the sky, then down at the grizzled face before him.

Chintz nodded.

"Good. Then get to work. Start the first fire directly beyond the graveyard to the east. The wind is getting up steadily. You are sure there are no farms to the west of us between here and River River?"

The man gave a negative shake of the head.

"That's all right then. There will be no damage done. And the river will cut the fire off. This time tomorrow we shall be homeless wanderers, Chintz—you and I." And the smuggler laughed bitterly.

Then his laugh died out.

"Well, to work. Set the fires going."



## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE FOREST DEMON PURSUES

PRUDENCE swung her mare out on to the overgrown trail to Damside City. Kitty was a trim-built little "broncho," compact, well ribbed, and with powerful shoulders and chest. She was just the animal to "stay" and travel fast. The road cut through the heart of the Owl Hoot bush, and ran in a diagonal direction, south-west towards the border. Then it converged with the border trail which skirted the great southern muskeg, and, passing through a broken, stony country, went on to Damside.

The wind was rapidly freshening, and the scudding clouds were quickly changing from white to grey, which, to the girl's practised mind, indicated an immediate change of weather. But she thought little of the matter beyond being thankful that the wind was well behind her, she wished to travel fast, and a "fair" wind is as necessary to the horseman, under such circumstances, as it is to the mariner.

For a time the roughness of the road required her attention. Kitty was surefooted, but the outstanding roots with which her path was lined needed careful negotiation. Presently the trail became wider and its surface more even, and signs of recent usage became apparent. The roots were worn down and the projecting stones had been removed. Neither did it take the girl long to decide whose servants had done these things. On the obscure trail were to be seen many signs of the traffic upon which the owner of Lonely Ranch had been engaged. Now Prudence gave Kitty her head, and the mare travelled at a great pace.

The breeze had chastened the laden air of the pine world. The redolent woods no longer scented the air,

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which had in consequence become fresh and burning for the summer. The impetuosity of her journey had added the girl's own ailments to her current ailings. She looked out upon the beautiful tinted world, but she deemed nothing of what lay even before her. Her mind was set upon the object of her journey, and her thoughts were centered round the picture in the dream of a moment.

It was difficult for her life seemed to have a dignity because from that which she had contemplated that morning. A great triumph, had just been with her since her home had established his influence in her. Her troubles and agonies were still more, and the least thing might upset every hope she entertained, but there was none, with her the remembrance that George Lincoln was innocent, and in that thought she felt a wonderful security. That he was a stranger was a matter of indifference. She loved him too well to let such an oblique error alter her estimation of him. She was too conscientious of the peace to consider as trifling a matter. Half the farmers in the country were in the habit of breaking the Customs regulations by putting wool and hay on international lands without a permit, and even hauling these things from across the border when such a course suited them, and in every case it was "contraband," but they were thought no loss of by their friends. Justice was no worse than they in spite of the fact that his offence carried with it a vastly heavier sentence.

It was the dread that she might be too late to intercept her brother. Providence would almost have been happy on the speed along that westward bound trail. She knew her brother's nature well. She knew that he was vindictive, and no doubt her own treatment of him had caused her to and all the lower instincts of his malignant nature, but she also knew that he would money, needed money. His greed for gold was a gluttonous soul on which he was incapable of resting, and he would sacrifice any personal feeling provided the achievement was sufficiently large. She knew that the achievement should be as large as even he could wish, and she knew that in this respect, as his ideas were extensive. Her own trouble, the one thought which alarmed her was the question of time. If the time were wasted when she attended her journey would

have been in vain, for the operator lived in Ardeny and would have gone home. Harvey would have arrived in Winnipeg and by the time the office opened the following morning the mischief would have been done.

She lashed her mare with the end of her reins and touched her flank with her heel. Kitty responded with a forward bound. The increased speed was all too slow for the rapid thought and deadly anxiety of the girl, but she was too good a horsewoman to press the willing beast beyond a rational gait.

The hands were "popped" jerkily as she passed down the sharp side of a draw cut through the prairie through a thicket of long grass and a grey cloud of mosquitoes, flies, roes and encephaloid horse and rider. The vicious insects settled like a grey cloth upon the heated mare and Prudence's soft flesh was pestered by hundreds of venomous needles at once. The girl swept the insects from neck and face, heedless of the torturing stings. The mare fretted and reared up the opposite slope while the girl bent forward in her saddle and sought to relieve the staunch little creature's agony by sweeping the poisonous insects from her steaming coat.

The mare proved on. Suddenly she threw up her head and snorted violently. Prudence was startled. Something had distracted Kitty's attention, and her wide-set ears were reared in alarm. Her nose was held high, and again and again she snorted. In company with her pace was slackened and became awkward. She no longer kept a straight line along the trail but moved from side to side in evident agitation. Prudence was puzzled and endeavored to steady the creature. But Kitty was not to be easily appeased. She rattled her bit and snatched at detestable grub crawling at the side bar with an evident desire to secure it in her teeth. The girl kept a tight rein and attempted to soothe the horse with the tender moccasins of her hand, but her efforts were unavailing. The ears were now turned backward and had assumed that curiously vicious inclination which in a horse is indicative of bad temper or extreme terror. Kitty had no voice in her, and Prudence quickly understood the nature of her mare's feelings.

The failure of her soothing efforts alarmed the girl.

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She sat up and looked about her. In the dense forest there seemed to be no unusual appearance. The trees were waving and bending in the wind and their greenings had a sadly mournful effect upon the scene, but otherwise there was nothing strange to be observed. The sky had assumed a leaden hue and in this direction the prospect was not alluring, but the clouds were fairly high and there was no suggestion of imminent storm.

Suddenly a couple of jack rabbits darted across the road. The mare "prumped," reared and swung round towards the trees. Prudence brought her up to her with sharply. Then she saw that the rabbits were racing on ahead down the trail. For the moment her patience gave way, and she dug her head hard against Kitty's side and the mare plunged forward. But her gut remained unsteady and in her agitation she kept changing her stride and once even tripped and nearly fell.

A coyote followed by his mate and two young ones ran out on to the trail and raced along ahead of her. They did not even turn their heads to look at her. Further on a great timber wolf appeared and trotted along the edge of the woods every now and then turning its head furtively to glance back.

Then quite suddenly Prudence became conscious of something unusual. She raised her face to the grey vault of the sky and sniffed at the air. A pungent scent was borne upon the wind. The odour of previous wood as strong as to be sickly came to her and to pungency was not the ordinary scent of the forest about her.

Half a dozen hit-faces dashed out on to the trail and joined in the race and the "growl" of the prairie dog warned her that other animals were about. The ominous odour grew stronger every moment and at last Prudence detected the smell of smoke. She turned her head and looked back and behind her directly in her wake she saw a thin grey haze which the wind was sweeping along above the trees.

She drew her mare up to a stand and as she sat looking back, a deadly fear crept into her eyes. Kitty reared the driver and reared and plunged to protest. The restraint made her hot. And all the time the girl saw that the smoke haze was thickening, and some strange

distant sounds like the discharge of heavy ordnance reached her.

The sweet oval face wore a strained expression; her eyes were wide open and staring and the fear which looked out of them was fear of no ordinary danger. She watched the dull haze as it thickened and rained on towards her. She saw it rise like great steam jets and wreath itself upwards as fresh volumes displaced the lower strata. She saw the dull brown mist creep into it as it densified, and she knew that it was smoke. The rest needed no explanation beyond the evidence of her senses. The sickly resinous smell told her what had happened. The forest was on fire!

The thought found vent in a muttered exclamation. Then came an after-thought—

"And the wind is blowing straight along behind me!"

For a moment she gazed about her wildly. She looked to the right and left. The forest walls were impassable. She looked back along the trail. The narrow ribbon-like space was filled with a fog of smoke which was even now enveloping her. What should she do? There was nothing for that to go on. If it the fire must be travelling space in the high wind. Still she stood. It seemed as though for the moment her faculties were paralysed with the horror of her discovery.

But at last she was moved to action. The mare became troublesome. The girl could no longer keep her still. The distracted animal humped her back and began to show signs of "bucking." Then came a rush of animals along the trail, they came racing for dear life, and their numbers were augmented from the wooded depths which lined their route.

Antelope led the way; with heads thrown up and antlers pressed low down upon their backs they seemed to fly over the sandy soil. Then came the "hopping" dogs, coyotes, prairie wolves. Birds of all sorts assembled in one long continuous flight. The animal kingdom of that region of forest seemed to have become united in their mutual terror—wolf and hare, coyote and jack-rabbit, hawk and blackbird, prairie chicken and grey-owl, all sworn enemies in time of calm prosperity, but now, in their terror, unopposed to the last. And all the

## END THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

time in the growing twilight of another came the distant booming of the cannon of great cannon.

The girl leaped forward. She stopped her head fixed against the mare's side and with a silent prayer joined in the race for life.

She had no exact knowledge of how far those sounds returned or where the cannon would come which she shut off the fire. The wind howls were sweeping on down the trail and with the roar of her paces behind, she supposed that in the confusion death would be silent.

The cannon gave distant and more distant. Her eyes hurried more. Under her she felt the mare stretching herself to the utmost of her power. She came up with many of the racing horses of the forest but they did not attempt to overtake the trail at her side. They were kept back by the fear of human presence. A horse for a enemy was behind them passing with grating stride which diminished speed with every stride.

These moments the girl gave to the struggle of the mare's best efforts and that she knew that the fire was gaining. How she did maintain herself now. It must be a matter of the descending cannon would be upon them. A horse never flagged and with every sound her footing became even more sure. A cannon shot at last bent over, it could to save the animal. That was all she knew to guard her striking dangerous. But for every stride the fatal cannon fired she knew that the fire was gaining many yards.

The hunting had increased to a steady race in the midst of which the deep thunder was sometimes came like the peals of a running storm. The wind rushed beating forward the fire going with it as a great rushing sweep of heated air. The mighty forest giants about her bent like reeds under the force of force and showed about their tops at the passing of the descending cannon.

The mare rushed down into a wide hollow. A subject large to reach through. The effort had been saved across it. The stream of the animals went swept on about her. She bounded the steep ascent opposite and Freedom was forced to lead her back. She dared not slow the horse to race up such an ascent even though the fire were only in a quarter of a mile of her. She would have been glad to behold the fatal creature which was now her only

hope. Even the poor forest creatures, mad as they were with terror, slackened their gait.

At length the hill-top was gained, and a long descent confronted them. Kelly showed no signs of exhaustion yet, and faced her work amidst the rush of refugees with all her original zest. Down into the valley they tore, for the secret of all perils was in pursuit.

The valley stretched away far into the distance; ahead, here, in this hollow the air was clearer. The hill had shut off the fog of smoke for the moment. The red green now had a smooth run, and a faint glimmer of hope gladdened the heart of the girl.

Without slackening her speed she looked back at the hill, fearing to see the red flames dart up over the path which her marchers had so recently trodden. But the flames had not yet reached the brow, and she sighed her satisfaction. The smoke was pouring over the tree-tops, as if, circling and eddying in a glad mass, were creeping up to join her wake; but as yet there were no flames. She looked the way and that at the dark green of the endless woods, the green fields of bending pine. She thought of the heavy weight of the smoke pressing away, leaving behind it only the charred skeletons, the barren, leafless trunks which for years would remain to mark the cruel path of flame.

Suddenly the roar, which had partly died away into a vague distant murmur toward the hill, burst out again with redoubled fury. Again she looked round, and the meaning was made plain to her. She saw the yellow fringe of flame as it came dancing, chaotic, a tattered ribbon of light upon the brow of the hill; she saw the dense pan of smoke hovering high above it like the threat of some dreadful doom. The track of the forest upon the summit remained for a second then over swept the red-green, shattering all towering alps in an almost torrential rush down to the woodlands below.

And now she beheld a sea of living fire as the hills blazed before her eyes. It was as though the whole place had been lit at one touch. The sea rolled on with incredible swiftness, as the tongues of flame licked up the inflammable objects they encountered. The efforts of her men became puny in comparison with the fearful

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pace of the flames. How could she hope to outstrip such awful speed?

On an even race the mare and on even the sudden torrent from the heat was insupportable. The girl leant forward over her to think how a neck she was dizzy and confused. Every blast of the wind burnt her more severely as the fire drew nearer. She felt how utterly hopeless were her horse's efforts.

The mare faltered in her stride; it was her first trip. The girl dismounted and lay. She propped at the top of her eyes like one demented. Her nerves were failing and lost. A groan from Kitty redoubled her efforts. The heat of the fire was aggravated by the girl's loud cries, and she stretched herself as she had never done before.

Now it seemed as though they were racing in the heart of a furnace. The whole country was in flames, and the roar and crackling of falling timber was incessant, and the smoke glowed everywhere even ahead.

Hunted almost the girl was borne on by the faithful Kitty. She no longer thought of what was on horse behind her. What little chance was left to her she centred upon keeping her seat in the saddle. An awful foreboding was upon her and everything about her seemed distant.

Kitty alone fought out the battle of that race. Her mistress was beyond all but leaning upon the faithful animal's back. Had she been less exhausted the girl could have seen what the mare saw. She would have seen the mad stream of the Hazy river ahead, and not then a quarter of a mile away. But she saw nothing, she felt nothing, she cared for nothing but her hold upon the saddle. Then it was that when she came to the river's edge and the mare plunged from the steep bank into the deep quick flowing stream she knew not what had happened, but, with a strange tenacity she held to the pommel of her saddle, while her loyal friend breasted the waters.

How they got out of the river Providence never knew and did she fully realize all that had happened when at last the horse and rider again stood on firm ground. And the tough little branches had covered another mile or more before the girl awoke to the fact that they were now in an open pasture country, and starting the hunt



of the great southern muskeg. Then it all came back to her, and, as Kitty kept steadily on, she looked fearfully about her. She saw away in the distance the awful pall, the lurid gleam of the flames, and a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving went up from that lonely trail for the merciful escape which had been hers. The girl leant over her mare's shoulder and cursed the foaming creek.

"Good kitty, faithful little mare," she exclaimed emotionally. Then she looked ahead and she remembered all. "But on, girl, on. There is more to do yet."

The telegraph operator at Danville was closing up his little shack. He had just disconnected his instrument and was standing in his doorway gazing out across the prairie to the east, watching the vast clouds of smoke belching from the direction of the woods. All about him was a heavy haze, and a nasty taste of smoke was in his mouth. He looked across to the only other buildings which formed the city of Danville: the grain elevator and the railway siding buildings. His own hut was close beside the latter. The men were leaving their work. Then presently he looked back in the direction of the distant fire.

"Tain't the prairie," he muttered. "Too thick. Guess the woods are blame'. That's beyond the Rosey. Can't cross there, so I reckon there's no danger to us. The air do stink here, guess I'll go and get my hand-ear and varnoses."

He turned back to the room and put on his hat. Just as he left his doorway to pass over to where his hand-car was standing on the railway track he brought up to a halt. A horse and rider were racing up the trail towards him.

"Hillo, what's this?" he exclaimed sharply. "May-be it is the prairie."

Prudence drew rein beside him. She had seen her man, and she knew that she was in time. Her joy was written in her face.

"My, but I've had a time," she exclaimed, as she slid down from her saddle. "I thought that fire had got me. Call up Winnipeg, please, Mr. Frances."

"Why, Miss Mailing, have you ridden through that?" asked the operator, pointing to the distant smoke.

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"Not through it, but with it distinctly hot upon my heels—or rather my mare's," the girl laughed. "But I want you to send a message for me. It isn't too late for Winnipeg?"

"Late, bless you, no. But what is it? Prairie or forest?"

"Forest," replied the girl shortly. "Where's a form?"

They passed into the hut. Prudence proceeded to write out her message while the man connected up Winnipeg and carried on a short conversation.

"Bad fire," he said.

"Very."

Prudence began to write.

"Just where?"

"Owl Hoot."

"River'll stop it."

"Yes."

"Good."

Prudence went on writing.

"Iredale's ranch burnt out?"

The girl started.

"Don't know."

"Must be."

"Oh!" Then: "Here you are; and do you mind if I wait for an answer?"

"Pleasure." And the man read the message—

"To Hervey Malling, Northern Union Hotel, Winnipeg.

"Return at once. Money awaiting you. Willing to pay the price on your arrival. Do not fail to return at once. The other matter can rest.

"PRUDENCE."

The operator tapped away at the instrument.

Hervey was sitting in the Northern Union Hotel smoking-room. He was talking to a burly man, with a red face and a shock of ginger-grey hair. This was the proprietor of the hotel.

"How long can you give me? I can settle everything by this day month. The harvesting is just finished. I only need time to haul the grain to the elevator. Will that satisfy you?"

The big man shrugged.

"You've put me off so often, Mr. Malling. It's not business, and you know it," he replied gutturally. "Will you give me an order on—your crop?"

He looked squarely into the other's face. Hervey hesitated. He knew that he could not do this, and yet he was sorely pressed for money. However, he made up his mind to take the risk. He thought his mother would not go back on him.

"Very well."

He turned as the bell-boy approached.

"Telegram for you sir; 'expressed.'"

Hervey took the envelope and tore it open. He read his sister's message, and a world of relief and triumph lit up his face.

"Good," he muttered. Then he passed it to his companion. "Read that. Do you still need a mortgage? I shall set out to-night."

The hotel proprietor read the message, and a satisfied smile spread over his face. It did not do for him to press his customers too hard. But still he was a business man. He, too, felt relieved.

"This relates to——"

"An outlying farm of mine which I have now sold."

"Your promise will be sufficient, Mr. Malling. I thought we should find an amicable settlement for our difficulty. You start to-night?"

"Yea."

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE AVENGER

ALICE was standing at the gate of the little front garden. She was talking to her lover, who had just ridden up from the direction of Owl Hoot. Robb had not dismounted, and his face was very serious as he leant down towards her.

"And I never knew a word about it. It's a jolly good thing I obtained the delivery of his bunch of cattle when I did, or goodness knows what would have happened. Well, anyhow I've lost a nice lump. My client, when he heard about the place being for sale, wanted to buy it for a back country for his beeves to winter in. Just my confounded luck. I knew there was a big fire out this way but I never thought that Iredale was the unfortunate victim. Now I've got to go over to Lakeville to see him—he's staying there, you know, since he was burnt out. I'll come back this way, and if Mrs. Malling can put me up for the night, I'll be grateful. My 'plug' won't stand the journey back home. You say Hervey will be along this evening?"

"Yes," replied the girl. Then seriously, "What are you going to do?"

"Interview him. There are things about that dog that want explaining. I take it he can explain 'em. I don't easily forget. And I owe some one a deal more than I've yet been able to pay. P'r'aps that dog 'll help me to discharge my debt. Good-bye, Al; I must be off or I shan't get back this afternoon."

Robb turned away in his cheerful, debonair manner and rode off. Troubles sat lightly on his stout heart. His effervescent nature never left him long depressed when Fortune played her freakish tricks upon him. He had lost his commission upon the sale of Iredale's land, but he had secured the better deal of the cattle. Therefore he was satisfied. But Robb was a very persistent

man in his extremely haphazard fashion. He had promised himself an interview with Hervey about his dog. He had never forgotten or forgiven the disaster in the mountains, and he believed that Hervey would be able to get him on the track of Zerkow Smith, whom he felt certain he had seen at the Winnipeg depot. He hoped so—and for this purpose, he intended to spend the night at Loon Dyke Farm.

As her lover rode away Alice turned back to the house. The anxious look was still upon her face. She knew that there was serious trouble in the family, and she could see no way of helping them except as she could. Prudence was in such a quarrel with her mother—she had been absent from the farm for two days and had not yet returned that morning. Mrs. Manning had been distracted with anxiety and grief until the reappearance of her daughter, and then, when she saw that she was well and that no accident had happened to her, she had flown into such a terrible passion that even Prudence had quailed before her. Never in her life had Alice seen the kindly old aunt give way to such rage. No disparaging epithet had been too bad for her child, and she had literally chased the girl from the room in which they had met. Since then Prudence had retreated to her bedroom, and Hephzibah had poured out the dregs of her wrath upon an empty kitchen. For even the long-suffering hired girl had feared to face her.

Now, as Alice approached the front door again, she heard the sound of high-pitched voices coming from the kitchen. Sarah Gurnage had come over while the stormy day was at its height, and as Alice listened she thought that these two old enemies were quarrelling. But her ears quickly told her that her surmise was wrong. She heard Prudence's voice raised in angry protest, and, instead of entering the house, she discreetly withdrew, passing round to the farmyard instead.

In the kitchen a different scene was being enacted.

Prudence was standing just inside the door. Her mother was busy taking to the fire in which were laid out the necessities for roasting a pig. She had faced round upon the girl and, without raising a rolling pin in one hand, and in the other she held a small basket of eggs. Sarah was seated in a high-backed Windsor chair. Her arms were folded across her chest, and her face expressed

perplexed alarm. Prudence's face was aflame; nor were her eyes one whit less angry than her mother's.

"But I say you shall hear me, mother, whether you like it or not. I'll not let you or any one else call me the slith which you did this morning for nothing."

The girl's voice was hoarse with nervous feeling. Mrs. Malling shook her rolling-pin in a perfect fury.

"Out of this kitchen, you baggage! Out of it, do you hear me? Go an' get your garments packed up, and out ye go into the street. Child o' my flesh, are ye? Out of my house, you drab, or maybe I'll be doing you a harm. I'll teach the like o' you to be stoppin' out o' nights an' then to come back wi'out a word of explainin'. I'll teach you."

"Give the child a hearing, Hephzibah," said Sarah, in her soft even tones, as there came a lull in the angry mother's tirade.

Prudence shot a grateful glance in her preceptor's direction.

Hephzibah turned swiftly on the peaceful Sarah. But the words of anger which hovered upon her lips remained unspoken. Sarah was an influence in the old lady's life, and long association was not without effect. She visibly calmed. Prudence saw the change and took advantage of it.

"How could I explain when you wouldn't listen to me?" she exclaimed resentfully. "Almost before I could say a word you called me all the shameful things you could think of. You drove me to silence when I was willing to tell you all—I was more than willing. You must know all, for the story I have to tell as nearly affects you as it does me. I stayed away from home to save an innocent man from the dreadful charge of murder, and your son from perpetrating the most wanton act of his worthless life."

A dead silence followed her words. Hephzibah stared at her with an expression of stupefied amazement, while Sarah turned in her chair with a movement which was almost a jolt. The silence was at last broken by the girl's mother.

"Murder? Hervey?"

And there was no understanding in her tone. Her mind seemed to be groping blindly, and she merely repeated the two words which struck her most forcibly.

"You, 'murder' and 'Hervey'!" Prudence retorted. "Hervey has accused George Fredale of the murder of Leslie Grey. Now will you listen to my explanation?"

Hephzibah precipitated herself into a chair. The nothing you was returned to its place upon the dough-board with a clatter, and the basket of eggs was set down with a force that wrecked yolk and its contents.

"Yes, go! Tell me all. Let me hear what devil's work my Hervey's been up to. Is that! an George Fredale a murderer?"

And Prudence, her anger evaporated as swiftly as her mother's, told the two delusions of her love for Hervey, and how he had asked her to be his wife. She told them how Hervey had come to her with the story of his discovery, how after attempting to blacken all his victim, he had offered his information to her at a price. How she forced him to prove his case, and had sent him to Wimping with that object. How she had been nearly distracted, and eventually made up her mind to go and see Fredale himself. How the accused man had retained her, her influence (as word and deed), and how he had shown her how impossible it would be for him to use the same means of clearing himself in a court of law. She dwelt upon each point so that these two, who were so dear to her, should not fail to understand as she understood. Then she told them how recognizing George's danger, she had resolved to intercept Hervey, and with her mother's assistance pay him off, and, finally how she had been overtaken by the latter, and how her mother had urged she had a word of counsel to bring to her brother, and how failing any other means of returning home she had taken shelter with the staid vicar clerk's wife until her mare had recovered and she was able to resume her journey to the farm.

It was a long story, and the many details of her mother gave her as much extra trouble in the telling, but as he would not put even her father's story there, yet she felt a heavy little point that poked her and her.

When the story was finished its effect was more quiescent than fast. The nothing which seemed to have gripped her mother's mind, and feeling was the part her boy had played. Her round eyes had grown stern, and her sunnily lips had parted as her breath came heavy and

fact. At last she burst out with a curious mixture of anger and sorrow in her words.

"Blame of my Sin, Gosh of my Gosh, an' to think o' the law! His Hervey a whelp of bad, a blood's rier. Oh, that I should be bred to see such a day, and she tucked herself with her hand supporting her head and her elbows planted upon her knees. "Oh, them travelin's in foreign parts. My poor poor Seta if he'd just lived long enough to get around our bay with a horse at paws to ght he been spared this disgrace. Prudence, girl, I am that sorry for what I've had to you."

Tears welled in the old eyes, which had now become very watery, and slowly rolled down the plump cheeks. Suddenly she gathered up her apron and flung it up over her head, and the weeping continued dismal. Prudence came over to her and knelt at her side, encircling her stout figure in sympathy. Sarah sat looking away towards the window with dreamy eyes. The old school-mistress made no comment, she was thinking deeply.

"Don't cry mother," said Prudence with an anxious catch in her voice. "Whatever Hervey's fault, he will reap his own punishment. I want you to help me now, dear. I want you to give me the benefit of your experience and your sound practical sense. I must see this through. I have a wicked brother and an obstinate lover to deal with, and I want you to help me, and tell me what is best to do."

The apron was removed from Mrs. Maffing's head and her eyes, red and watery, looked at the girl at her side with a world of love in their depths.

"Those two men will be here this afternoon," the girl went on. "George is coming to tell you his story himself, that you may judge him. He declares that some what may be still set root with this shame upon him. In justice to us his friends, and to himself, he must face the consequences of his years of wrong doing. Hervey will be here for his money. This is the position, and, according to my reckoning they will arrive at about the same time. I don't quite know why, but I want to confront Hervey with the man he accuses. Now tell me what you think."

"I am thinking you make the third of a pack of fools," said the farm wife gently. "George is no murderer, he's not the killer's sort. He's a man, he is. Then



why worry? An' say, if that boy o' mine comes along he'll learn that there Ar tie g'lid fields is a cooler place for his likes than his mother's farm." The old woman's choler was rising again with tempestuous suddenness. "Say he's worse n' a skunk and a sight more dangerous than a Greaser. My but he'll learn somethin' from them as can teach him!"

"Yes mother," replied the girl, a little impatiently, "but you don't seem to see the seriousness of what he charges—"

"That I do, miss. Am I wantin' in understandin'? George is as innocent as an unborn babe, so what's the odds along o' Hervey's accusin'? It don't amount to a heap o' corn shucks. That boy ain't responsible, I tell ye. He's like to get locked up himself in a luny 'sylum. I'll give him accusin'!"

"But, mother, that won't do any good. He must be paid off."

"An' so he shall—and so he shall, child. There's more dollars in this farm than he reckons on and they're ready for usin' when I say the word. If it's pay that's needed he shall be paid though I ain't just understandin' the need."

Sarah's voice broke in at this point.

"The child's right, Hephzibah, there's money to be spent over this thing, or I'm no judge of human nature. Hervey's got a strong case, and from what the story tells us, George is a doomed man if he goes before the court. Innocent he may be—innocent he is, I'll wager; but if he's obstinate he's done for."

The farm wife made no reply, but sat gazing wistfully before her.

"Yes, yes," Prudence said earnestly. "It is just the money—nothing more. We must not let an innocent man suffer. And, 'Aunt' Sarah, we must prevail upon George to let us stop Hervey's mouth. That is our chief difficulty. You will help me—you and mother. You are so clever, 'Aunt' Sarah. George will listen to you. Oh, we must—must save him, even against himself."

Sarah nodded her head sagely, she was deeply affected by all she had heard, but she gave no outward sign.

"Child," she replied, "we will all do our best—for him—for you, but yours is the tongue that will persuade him best. He loves you, child, and you love him. He will not permit, if you are set against it."

"I hope it will be as you say," replied Prudence.

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dubiously. "But when he comes you will let him tell his story in his own way. You must listen patiently to him. Then you can laugh at his determination and leave your arguments to hear. Then we will keep him until Hervey arrives, and we will settle the matter for ever. Oh, mother, I dread what is to come."

Mrs. Malling did not seem to be paying much heed, but, as the girl moved away from her side, she spoke. "There was no grief, no anger in her voice now. She spoke quite calmly, and Sarah's irritable look died keenly over at her."

"Yes, girl, we'll settle this rascal, and—Hervey."

Prudence moved towards the door. She turned at her mother's words.

"I will go up stairs," she said. "I want to think."

She opened the door and nearly "bumped" against the dog Neche, who was standing just in it. There was a fanciful suggestion of the ray-whipper about the creature, his stiff legs were almost funny. He moved slowly away, and walked with the girl to the foot of the stairs, where he laid himself down with a complacent grunt. The girl went up to her room.

"This day's pain's will be writ on my heart for ever," said the farm-wife plaintively, as the door closed behind her daughter.

"Ah, you see, Hepzibah, and let us ever read of them, for there will be little credit for any one in those same doings," said Sarah solemnly.

Mrs. Malling hugged herself, and again began to rock slowly. But there were no signs of tears in her round, dark eyes. Now and again her lips moved, and occasionally she muttered to herself. Sarah heard the name "Hervey" pass her lips once or twice, and she knew that her old friend had been sorely stricken.

As the time for Lordale's arrival drew near, Prudence became restless. Her day had been spent in idleness as far as her farm work was concerned. She had chosen the companionship of Alice, and had unbentened her heart to her. But sympathetic and practical as her friend was, she was quite unable to help her.

As four o'clock drew near, however, Alice did the only thing possible. She took herself off for a walk down the Lakeville trail. She felt that it was better for everybody that she should be away while the trouble was on, and

and she would meet her lover on his way to the farm, and give him a warning against making his meditated stay for the night.

At the appointed hour there came the clatter of a carriage wheels at the front gate, and a moment later Prudence led her lover into the parlour. After a few brief words she hurriedly departed to summon her mother and Sarah. There was a significant solemnity in this summons—nor was it softened by the stranger's manner. Even the selfish Sarah seemed impressed with what was happening, for she clung to the girl's arm, both wing her cheeks the while, and finally laid down upon the trailing portion of her skirt when she took up her position beside her lover and waited for him to begin.

The opening was a painful one for everybody. Prudence scarcely knew how to face those for the first and foremost her old graceful story. He thought of all they had been to him during his long years upon the prairie. He thought of their implicit trust and faith in him. He almost quailed before the steady honest eyes of the old people. However, he at last forced himself to his task and plunged into his story with unassuming business.

"I am accused of murder," he said, and paused, while a sickly feeling pervaded his stomach.

Mrs. May's hands hid her head. His was too open to remain silent long.

"Oh Louise Grey," she said at once. "And you needn't to tell us such a story, George. We know the yarn you are about to tell us. As if we think we are going to believe any idle painted stuff like such as my Harvey gets you? Struggles you may be, but that you are such a villain's human flesh not even a minute of the Gospel's grace to convince us. Here I conjure the man I give my hand to. Shake me by the hand, George, shake me by the hand." And the form rose from her chair and ambled over to the room with her hand outstretched.

Prudence clasped it in both of his. And ardent in his life had he experienced such a burst of thankfulness as he did at that moment. His heart was too full to speak. Prudence smiled gravely as she watched this unhesitating token of her mother's loyalty to a friend. But was Sarah backward in her expression of gratitude?

"Nephew that's right, George, and she speaks her truth

of us. But there's work to be done for all that. Hervey's to be dealt with."

"To be tried!" said Hephzibah uncompromisingly, as she returned to her seat.

Iredale shook his head and his face set sternly. Prudence saw the look she feared creep into her lover's eyes. She opened her lips to protest, but the words remained unspoken. She had heard the rattle of a buckboard outside. The sound died away and she knew that the vehicle had passed round to the barn. She waited in an agony of suspense for her brother's appearance.

"You needn't to shake your head," went on the farm-wife. "This matter's my concern. It's my dollars as is put to pay Master Hervey—on' when he gets em may they blister his fingers, I sez."

Prudence heard a footstep in the hall. The crucial moment had arrived, and her heart palpitated with nervous apprehension. Before Iredale could reply the door was flung open, and Hervey stood in their midst. Instantly every eye was turned upon him. He stood for a moment and looked round. There was a slight unsteadiness in his attitude. His great eyes looked white, than ever and they were curiously bloodshot. At least one of the three ladies possessed an observant mind. Sarah saw that the man had been drinking. To her the signs, though slight, were unmistakable. The others did not seem to notice his condition.

"Ah," he said with an attempt at pleasantness, "a new little party. Well, I've room for the dubs."

His eyes lit upon the figure of George Iredale and he broke off. The next moment he went on angrily.

"What's that man doing in this house?" he cried, his eyes fiery blazing with sudden rage. "Is this place turned into a refuge for murderers?"

The man's fury had not fire to the powder train. His mother was on her feet in a twinkling. Her comfortable body fairly shook in her indignation. Her face was a flaming scarlet, and her round eyes sparkled wickedly.

"And who be you to question the railing of my house, Hervey Hailing?" she cried, "sure when comes it that you've the right to raise your voice against my guests? An' by what right d'ye dare to accuse an innocent man? Answer me, you trap of Evil," she demanded. But she

gave him no time to speak, and went on, her voice rising to a piercing scream. "Spare your wicked tongue which shall be forked by reason of the lies as has fallen from it. Oh that you should be able to call me mother! I'd rather mother the offspring of a rattlesnake than you. What have you done by me all your life but bring sorrow and trouble upon those who've done all that which is them to help you? Coward! Traitor! As you come now with lies on your tongue to harm an innocent man what a door you no harm." She breathed hard. Then her wrath swept on and the room rang with the piercing pitch of her voice. "You've come for your blood money—your thirty pieces. You villain, if your poor father were alive this day he should lay a raw hide about you till your bones were saved. Snakes! I've a mind to eat about you myself. Look at him the blackheart! Look at him as! Was ever such filth of a man? and him my son. Hand money! Hand money! And to think that I'm living to know it."

She paused. Hervey broke in—

"Nonsense, you old fool! You don't know what you're talking about. That man's pointing over at Iredale, who's not waiting for an opportunity to interfere," is the murderer of Luke Grey. I suppose he has been peering you with Kearney and yerna. But I tell you he murdered Grey. I'm not here for any trifling. I got Pringle's message to say the money was forthcoming. Where is it? Fifteen thousand dollars buys me and that I want at once. If I have any more saving I'll make it twenty thousand."

He looked about him eagerly and his eyes finally paused at George Iredale seated beside Penelope. He said nothing for his mother's volubility, but he was watchful of the smuggler.

Suddenly the busy rancher sprang to his feet. He stepped up to Hervey. The latter moved a pace back. "A one cent you cowardly bound!" he roared. "Not one cent shall you have, do you hear? I thank God that I am here to stop you robbing those, your mother and sister." Mrs. Milng tried to interfere, but he waved her back. "I've come at the right time and I tell you that you shall not take one cent of the money. I will never leave you but you shall wrangle it from them. I will open your game. This is what I intend to do. You and I will set out for Winnipeg to-night, and together we

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will interview the Commissioner of Police. Do you understand me? I have the whip hand now. And I promise you your silence shall not be bought."

Prudence interfered.

"Listen to me George. I implore you not to do this thing. Hervey can have all he wants—everything. You are innocent we know but you cannot prove your innocence. Why should you break my heart when there is a way out of the difficulty? There is but one person who can denounce you and his silence we can purchase. Oh George," she went on passionately—"as you love me listen. My heart will break if this thing you would take comes to pass. Oh my love, say you won't do it! Let mother pay the man off that he may pass out of our lives for ever. See, no there is going for the money now. It is so easy, so simple."

Mrs. Blanning had risen from her seat and moved away to the door. Hervey stared at the far end of the parlour facing the open window. He saw his mother pass out and a great rush of satisfaction came into his eyes. After all, these women meant to treat him fairly, he thought.

He grinned over at Iredale.

"Better drop it, Iredale, and don't play the fool. When I get the money I shall forget that I ever knew you."

The organ pipe was about to fire a swift retort when the arrival of voices coming in at the open window interrupted him. The voices were a man's and a woman's. Prudence recognised Alice's tones. The other she did not recognise at once.

Sarah Gurnidge, who had been a silent observer of the scene, had heard the sound too, but she was absorbed in what was being enacted about her. Her eyes were upon Hervey. She saw him start and his great haunting eyes were turned upon the window. Suddenly he rushed forward towards it. He had to pass round the table, close to where Prudence was now standing. In doing so he lurched against the dog, which was standing with its ears pricked up and its head turned in the direction whence the voices sounded.

The man's cold face was blanched. A wild hunted look was in his eyes. Iredale saw what was afoot and his reply died upon his lips as he wondered at this sudden change.

"Shut the window. Do you hear?" cried Hervey anxiously. "Don't let them hear. Don't let them—"

He had reached the window to carry out his own instructions. His hands were upon the window-sill and he was about to fling the glass panes to the street. But suddenly his arms dropped to his sides. He stood face to face with the figure of Robb Chillingwood.

There was a dreadful silence. Then slowly Hervey backed away, his glaring eyes were fixed upon the stern countenance of the outlawed man. Slowly he backed, backed from the apparition, and the onlookers noted the pale cheeks and blazing eyes, and they wondered helplessly. Now did Hervey pause until he reached the wall furthest from the window. Then he stood still and his position slowly moved.

Suddenly there was a cry, and it rang with vengeful triumph. It came from the man at the window—Robb Chillingwood.

"By God! it's Zachary Smith!"

The next instant and he was in the room.

The onlookers gazed blankly from one to the other of the two men. What did it mean? Who was Zachary Smith? And why did Robb so call Hervey? Then their eyes settled on the man against the wall. The cheeks were no longer pallid—they were flushed with a hectic coloring and their strange eyes were filled with an awful, murderous light. The man seemed to move, but he did not speak—only his right hand slipped round behind him.

Then Robb's voice sounded through the room again.

"So Mr Zachary Smith we meet again. And by the Lord Harry, you shall swing for what you did in the mountains. Highway robbery of the Government bullion under the charge of Leslie Grey, and the murder of our Indian guide, Hans Moon." Then he turned. "Hold that done!" he shouted, and Leslie sprang to obey.

"But —" Prudence rushed forward, but Sarah stopped her and drew her back.

A wild laugh came from Hervey's direction.

"And what's going to take me?" he cried. "You, Robb Chillingwood, you? Ha, ha!" and his mirthful laugh rang out again. "Look to yourself, you traitor Grey, crossed my path, and he paid for it with his life. You shall follow him."

While his words yet rang upon the air his hand shot out from behind him, and a heavy revolver. The pistol was raised, and a curse went up from the two ladies.

Suddenly there was a rush, a snarl, and a great body seemed to literally hurl itself through the air. A shot rang out, simultaneously a cry echoed through the room. Hervey staggered as something seized him by the throat and tore away the soft flesh, another shot followed.

It all happened in a twinkling. Hervey fell to the ground with a gurgling cry, and Neche, the dog, until then forgotten by everybody, rolled over by his side with one dying yelp of pain. Then silence reigned throughout the room and all was still.

Iredale returned his smoking pistol to his pocket, and went over to Hervey's side. His movements seemed to release the others from the spell under which they had been held. Robb, unharmed by Hervey's shot, came forward and Sarah and Prudence followed in his wake. But Iredale waved the ladies back.

"Stand away, please," he said quietly. "The dog had finished him before I got my shot in to save him. The brute has literally torn his throat out." Then he looked over at the dead hound. "It's awful; I wonder what made the dog turn upon him?"

"Are they both dead?" asked Robb, in an awe-struck voice.

Iredale nodded.

"It must have been the sight of Hervey's levelled pistol that made the dog rush at him," said Prudence. "I've seen him do so before."

"Strange, strange," murmured Iredale.

"That dog feared firearms," said Sarah.

"Perhaps he had reason," observed Robb significantly, "he only has three sound legs. My God! And not content with his victims in the mountains, he— But, yes, I see it. This man came here without expecting to meet Grey or me." Robb broke off and looked at Prudence. "Of course, I am beginning to understand. You and Grey were to have been married." Then he turned back to the contemplation of the dead bodies.

"Yes, the murderer of Grey lies confessed," said Iredale quietly, "and I think that his motives were even stronger than those attributed to—"

Prudence placed a hand over his mouth before he could complete his sentence.

They were startled from their horrified contemplation



of the work of those last few moments by the sound of Hephzibah's voice calling from her bed room. The sitting room door had been opened by Alice, who had entered the moment Iredale had released the hound. Now they could hear the farm-wife moving about overhead, evidently on her way down stairs.

Sarah was the first to recover her presence of mind. She turned upon Robb.

"Not a word to her about—about——"

Robb shook his head.

Iredale snatched the pistol from the dead man's hand.

Mrs. Mallings' footsteps came creaking down the stairs. Suddenly Prudence's hands went up to her face as she thought of the shock awaiting her mother. Alice dragged her away to a chair. Iredale and Robb stood looking down at the two objects on the floor. Master and hound were lying side by side.

Sarah ran to the door and met the farm-wife. She must never know that her son was a murderer—a double murderer.

Those within the room heard the school-ma'am's gentle tones.

"No no, Hephzibah, you must not go in there yet. There are things—things which you must not see. The hound has knied him. Hervey enraged the dog, and the wretched beast turned upon him—and he is dead!"

Then there came the sound of a scuffle. The next moment mother Hephzy pushed her way into the room. She looked about her wildly, one hand was clutching a bundle of hundred-dollar bills. Suddenly her round, staring eyes fell upon the two objects lying side by side upon the ground. She looked at the hound, then she looked upon her son. Iredale had covered the torn throat with pocket handkerchiefs.

The bills slowly fell in a shower from her hand, and her arms folded themselves over her breast. Then she looked in a dazed fashion upon those about her, muttering audibly.

"He's dead—he's dead," she repeated to herself over and over again. Then suddenly she ceased her repetitions and shook her head. "Mussy-a-me, mussy-a-me! The Lord's will be done!"

And she slowly fell in a heap by her dead son's side.

## IN CONCLUSION

TIME, the great healer of all sufferings, all sorrows, can do much, but memory clings with a pertinacity which defies all time's best efforts. Time may soften the pungency of deep seated sorrow, but it cannot shut out altogether the pain of a mother's grief at the loss of an only son. In spite of all Harvey's crimes he was "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow." The story of his villainies was rigidly kept from her, and so she thought of him only as a prodigal, as a boy to be pitied, as one whose offences must be pardoned, she sought for his good points, and, in her sweet motherly heart, saw a wonderful deal in him on which to centre her loving memory, which, had he lived, even she could never have discovered. It is something that every man has to be humbly grateful for, that women are like this, so full of the patient, enduring love which can see no wrong in the object of their affections.

But Leon D. Le Farm became intolerable to Hephzibah Mallory after the phastly tragedy of her son's death, and when Ruth and Alice saw fit to marry, urged on to that risky experiment by the two older ladies, she insisted upon leaving the place to them on ridiculously easy terms. She would have given it to them only for their steady refusal to accept such a magnificent wedding gift from her.

The old lady was rich enough for her needs and her daughter's, and, in a nice woman as she was, she was generous to a fault where her affections were concerned. Prudence too was satisfied with any arrangement which would take her away from the farm. Knowing what she knew of her brother, Leon D. Le could never again be her home. So mother and daughter retired to Amesley, and only once again did they return to their old home on the

believed of visits, and that was to assist at the funeral of christening the son and heir of the Chillingwoods.

Later on Prudence induced her mother to make Winnipeg her home, but though, for her daughter's sake, she acceded to the request, she was never quite at ease among her new surroundings. Nor was Sarah Gurdige, when she visited her old friend during her holidays, slow to observe this. "My dear," she told Alice, one day after her summer vacation, "Hephzibah is failing fast. She's quite old, although she is my junior by two years and three months. An idle life doesn't suit her, and as for Prudence, she wears fine clothes, and goes out in society all day and most of the night, but she's that thin and melancholy that you wouldn't know her for the same child. It's my opinion that she's young. They are both young. I found a letter from Hamilton when I got back home. It was from George Iredale, and I'm going to answer it at once."

"And what are you going to say in your reply?" laughed Alice. "I know your matchmaking propensity. So don't Robb."

The quiet, dreamy face of the old school mistress smiled over at the happy mother.

"Say?" she exclaimed. "I'm going to give George a piece of my mind for staying away so long. I know why he's doing so, and my belief as to the cause of his absence is different from what Prudence is beginning to imagine. She thinks he has left her because of her brother's death, and it's that that's driving her to an early grave. I shall certainly tell George what I think." And Sarah wagged her head sagely.

And she was as good as her word. She had not seen fit to tell Alice that she had been in constant communication with George Iredale ever since the day of the tragedy or that she was in his confidence as regarded Prudence. George had left the district to give both Prudence and her mother time to recover from the shock. And now that a year or more had passed away, he had written appealing to Sarah to tell him if she thought the time auspicious for his return.

In a long, carefully-wooded letter Sarah advised him not to delay.

"By dint of much perseverance," she wrote, "I have persuaded the child out of her absurd notions about the reflections her brother's doings have cast upon her. She looks at things from a healthier standpoint now. Why should she not marry? What has she done to debar her from fulfilling the mission which is appointed for every woman? Nothing! And I am sure if a certain man should return and renew the appeal which he made at the time when the Lord's anger was visited upon her brother, she would give him a different reply. However, I must not waste all my space upon the silly notions of a child with a misdirected conscience."

And how her letter bore fruit, and how George Iredale returned and sought Prudence in the midst of the distractions of Winnipeg's social whirl, and how the girl's answer, when again he appealed to her, turned out to be the one Sarah had prophesied for him, were matters of great satisfaction to the sage old school-mistress.

She assisted at the wedding which followed, she saw the bride and bridegroom off at the railway depôt, she remained to console her old friend for the loss of her daughter. Then she bled her off once more, back to the bleak, staring school-house, where she continued to propound sage maxims for the young of the district until her allotted task was done, and the tally of her years complete.



## DATE DUE SLIP

5 RETURN

## 5 RETURN

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CULLUM RIDGWELL 1867-  
THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

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Cullum, Ridgwell, 1867-.  
The hound from the North.

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